

Dash



The 2nd book in the Saderia Series
Sarah Renée

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Dedicated To
My Dad
Who can always make me laugh

Chapter One

Past vs. Present

The dark brown lion gazed up at the darkening sky above, thinking once again of the events that had led him out there. As he watched, a single star began to shimmer in the black sky. Stifling a sigh, he lowered his head and padded over to the thick patch of trees and bushes. Leafy trees hung over and sheltered a certain place in the clearing; below it was a soft patch of flattened grass: his sleeping place.

Dashenirus padded over to the grassy patch and laid down to fall asleep, shivering and curling up so that the darker brown tuft on his tail touched his face. It was colder than usual that night and he didn't have a normal den or even a blanket to keep himself warm...but then, he had been living that way for a while. More stars began to appear in the sky and a full moon appeared beside them, shimmering down on him.

The lion shook his mane of darker brown fur over his eyes to block the light, and tried to fall asleep, half hoping he wouldn't wake up tomorrow. But no matter how hard he tried to concentrate on sleeping, his mind kept jumping back to all the things that had caused him to be sleeping out in the freezing cold. Twigs in his sleeping place kept poking him awake. His stomach growled since there was not much food except for the few berries he could find. But it was *how* he came to be living in such a place that disturbed him.

All the things that he had done and all the things that had been done to him whirled around in his mind and a familiar pang of sorrow made his mouth taste salty. He felt a rush of anger as he thought once more about his father, but it was accompanied by a frustrating pang of grief. He hated that he missed his father, after what he had done. It was so much harder to miss him and hate him at the same time and he wasn't sure why he should feel either emotion.

His father had been evil and Dashenirus had always hated him. Every miserable day of his life, he had hoped his father would be gone. But now he was, and he was no happier than he had been before, maybe even worse. At least when his father had been around he had had a warm house to sleep in and easy access to food, albeit it wasn't the safest place with his Dad around.

On top of that, he always felt guilty when he thought of his father, knowing that he was partially responsible for his death. But what else could he have done? His father had needed to be stopped, and he had done what he'd had to. He had tried to do what was right, but that was the problem with him. No matter what he tried to do, he would always be a failure and everything he ever did would end horribly. He was not like his father; nothing would ever go his way, like his Dad had said so many times before.

At least, he hoped he was not like his father. No matter how much he might miss him, he hoped with all his heart that he would not end up like him, and so he tried to remember who he was. Not the easiest thing to do. He had tried to be himself around his father, but every time he had tried, he had gotten hurt because his father had hated his son being so different than him. After ten years of that, he just gave up trying. His father still hated him but he stopped caring about that, too, and stayed locked up in his old room.

Now that his father was gone and he was all alone, living out in the woods, he could barely remember who he was or who he was supposed to be. He felt no more freedom than he had before. His past still haunted him every day and night, and not a second would pass where he wouldn't wish it would all disappear. The ghost of his father, and the mother he had never known, took up all his time and he could never stop thinking about them.

A cold breeze shook his fur, blowing his mane out away from him, and he curled in on himself more, trying in vain to protect himself from the cold. It was no use because the ground, normally a little bit soft, was frigid and hard with cold, it being the middle of winter. The trees above him were losing their leaves and didn't provide much shelter either. Nothing was growing so it was hard to find food. He could always go back to his old house because he knew there was still some food left in the refrigerator, even if it had long staled, but he would never go back there. He had made a

vow never to go back and he was terrified of that place since every horrible memory he had came from that house.

Everything around him was withering and dying away, making the scenery very depressing. It just made him think more and more of his gloomy past. The skeletons of the trees were all around him, making him think of his dead father so he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block out the images in his head. Why did everything have to remind him of his sordid past? His father's memory would never stop haunting him.

And then there was his mother. He had never stopped wondering about her, even when his father had been alive. He wondered where she was and what she was doing, if she were more like his father or more like him? If she ever thought about him or about coming back? Maybe she wasn't even alive anymore. How would he ever be able to find out anything about his mother? He had tried to before, but there was never anything he could find; it was hopeless.

Often, he had tried to find some memory of his mother that was untainted by his father, but he just couldn't remember that far back. It was so long ago and no matter how much time he spent struggling to make some memory surface, he could think of nothing.

Sometimes he liked to hope that his mother was kinder than his father and more like him. He liked to think that someday she would return to find him, and the two of them could be a family without having to worry about his horrible past. But he knew that he was just deluding himself. There was no way that fantasy could ever come true, even if his mother was nice, which he somehow doubted. She had never cared about him; if she had, why would she have left ten years ago?

Still, sometimes he dreamed about his mother coming to him and telling him that it would be all right and she would take care of him, like he imagined mothers did. He would make up any number of excuses as to why she had left him with his father and believed that she was sorry, but he knew she probably wasn't. He believed his father when he'd told him that she had never cared. He didn't know why, but he did. The brief glimpses of her that he could remember were not the warm, loving ones anyone else could expect from a mother. He tried not to think about her.

Other times, he wondered about the Princess. What had happened to her during the time that he had runaway to the woods after his father had died? Was she all right, and was she with her family now? When he wasn't thinking about that, he wondered why he should care at all. Why *should* he care about her; why shouldn't he hate her? But the fact of the matter was that he didn't, and he was glad he didn't, even if it just gave him something else to worry about.

Eventually he was able to fall asleep when his troubled thoughts acted as some twisted lullaby. Like every other night, his dreams were disturbed by horrible visions of his father, and the fight that had surely taken place, ending in his Dad's death. But he also dreamt of all the awful things his father had done and all the awful things he had tried to make his son do; all the monsters he had tried to make him become. He had refused every time; it had ended badly.

With a cry of fear, he awoke a few hours before morning would officially start and let out a sigh of relief that he was safe. But that relief didn't last long. He was still in the woods and just as miserable as before. He didn't want to go back to sleep for fear of the nightmares that would torment him, and he knew that sleeping would be hopeless anyway.

Instead, he got to his paws, stretching his limbs and trying to ignore the ache from sleeping on the hard ground. He had thought he would have gotten used to it by now, but apparently not. He walked over to the closest berry bush he could see and looked hopelessly at the measly, dying berries left after enduring the cold. On second thought, maybe he would save them for later.

He padded back to his nest and flopped down on the ground, looking up at the dark sky as it began to get lighter. Not for the first time, he wondered why he was enduring all of this. Why didn't he just give up? What exactly was he working toward? Nothing, so why did he keep going; it was stupid. He sighed, knowing that no matter what he thought, he couldn't just give up. What else could he do? Starve to death?

Even though he had no other options, he still wished that he could be anywhere but here, living this miserable life, but there wasn't an alternative and wishing just made him sadder. He wondered why he had

been forced to live out here and suffer when he had never done anything to anybody. Why should he deserve this when he had always strived to be nice? When he had put up with everything else, including his father's dark influence, even now after he was dead?

Thinking about this prompted something his father had said to come to mind: *Weak animals never get what they want; they just get stepped on. Strong, ambitious animals can have anything their heart desires.*

Dashenirus took a deep breath and started toward the tiny pile of things he had taken with him when he had runaway, when he'd hoped he could make a better future for himself, even when the present seemed so impossible.

“I guess you were right, Dad,” he muttered, as he started to get ready for school.

“Ms. Ceril?” the black panther asked, surprised. “What are you doing in my office so early?”

The bobcat seemed very uncertain about what she was going to do. She had started out regretting her decision but she knew it was for her family and she had already served the school for a long time. But now she was even more uncertain and she took a deep breath before saying, “Principal Delaca, I have to quit.”

The principal's eyes blinked open in surprise. He got to his feet. “Quit? But you've been excellent here for many years. Why would you want to quit now?”

“My family is moving to another neighborhood and it's about time for me to retire anyway. I've enjoyed working here but now I just want to settle down with my family.”

Principal Delaca thought about that and started to protest but then let out a sigh. “You know I can't keep you here if you don't want to stay. And I understand what you're saying. But you have been a great assistant principal for many years.”

“Thank you, Mr. Delaca. But my mind is set.”

He nodded a little sadly. “I understand. I'll mail you your last salary.”

“Thank you.”

He sat back down, even more stressed now that he had to deal with Assistant Principal Ceril quitting, on top of the other thing he would soon have to face. “But where am I going to find a replacement?” he said after a moment. “It’d be best to get a new assistant principal sooner rather than later because of...”

“I know. I understand. I’ve been thinking about this for a while and I’ve looked around for a quick replacement after I’ve gone. What with the tiger who’s coming, I knew you’d be stressed without someone else. So I have already found a replacement.”

He sat up, interested. “You have? That’s very thoughtful. Who?”

That was the part that she was the most nervous about but she quickly handed him a manila folder with the replacement’s credentials and information. She didn’t know what it was about the animal that was to replace her, but she just didn’t like something about her. Nonetheless, the documents seemed secure and the principal needed an assistant, especially with an important new student coming. A new student they weren’t exactly happy to welcome.

The principal quickly looked over the papers concealed within the folder and then nodded slowly. “Impressive. She seems to be just what we’re looking for. Maybe not as good as you have been, and lacking a little experience, but she seems to be a good choice.”

Ms. Ceril nodded, trying to feel more optimistic about what was going to happen. “We should go meet her and tell her that she’s going to be the new assistant principal.”

“You’re right.” The black panther took another look at the papers listing where the new employee lived and then signaled for the bobcat to join him. “It’s not too far away from here,” he reported. “You should come, too. Maybe you could give her some quick tips.”

She smiled faintly. “All right.”

The two animals walked out of the school and started down a path that would lead them to the new animal’s address. They had to leave the path and cross through a swath of woods but they were forest animals and

used to it, leaping nimbly over bushes and roots in the way. It wasn't long before they reached a house out in the middle of the woods. It was very out-of-the-way, they noticed, but then, some animals preferred to live away from towns and big neighborhoods.

The principal walked up to knock on the door and a moment later it opened to reveal a stunning lioness. She had bright, cream-colored fur but her features were sharp and somewhat cold looking. Her ice blue eyes seemed to bore into them and she wore a knowing half-smile that looked more like a sneer. Mr. Delaca noticed there was something about this animal he was a little uncertain about, like Ms. Ceril, but he ignored it, knowing that was silly. He just smiled at the lioness, warmly but professionally.

"Hello," he said. "I'm Principal Delaca of WildWorld Elementary. Are you the one who spoke to Ms. Ceril before?"

Her little smirk grew a little wider. "I am." "Good. Your credentials are impressive." He noticed her sneer grew more knowing and even a little sarcastic, but ignored it as he went on, "And we need a replacement assistant principal as soon as possible. So, congratulations. You're hired."

She grinned. "Excellent."

"We know it's a little fast and we apologize for that, but it'd be best if you could start today. We're getting ready for an important new student."

Her eyes narrowed but her grin stayed in place. "No worries, I'll be there. This new student—how important?"

"She's the Princess of the forest," Ms. Ceril informed her.

"Ah. I'll do what I can to deal with the...situation."

"Excellent," Mr. Delaca said happily. He paused. "What should we call you?"

Her ears flicked and she let out a little sound that could be laughter. "Call me Lolista."

The meeting took place a few hours later, giving the two teachers that came plenty of time to attend it and then go back to their classrooms to prepare for the school day. Mr. Delaca busied himself by organizing the

many papers on his desk and thinking about how much the new student would change the school once she arrived. All the students would be excited but some might feel put down and others might feel afraid that they had to act a certain way with her around. She would be snooty, stuck-up and have a too-good-for-education attitude, he guessed, gritting his teeth bitterly. He disliked anyone who thought and acted like that, and now he was going to have to come face-to-face with it and try to act respectfully, for his sake.

Eventually, a leopard with moss green eyes stepped in the room. Her spots were unusual, formed in a strange pattern, and the orange color of her fur was slightly darker than normal. She was followed by a broad-shouldered white tiger with warm, sky blue eyes. “Ms. Spot, Ms. Zanah,” he greeted the two animals.

The leopard had a kind but strict attitude and she quickly went over to sit before her boss in the two chairs, along with the white tiger. They had been told that a new student was coming to the school and that was why they had been called in to the meeting with the principal, but it usually wasn’t that big of a deal. Why was it so important now?

“Why did you call us here?” the leopard asked curiously.

“As I’m sure you’ve been told, a new student is coming to WildWorld Elementary,” Mr. Delaca told them with a hard expression. “Normally, it isn’t too big of a concern, even in the middle of the semester like this, but it is now because the animal who will be joining us is Princess Saderia.”

The two animals sat up straighter and instantly understood why this was such a problem. A Princess coming to a normal public school like theirs was definitely something to be worried about.

“You’ve already guessed what that’ll be like,” Mr. Delaca told them, noticing their reactions. “You know how a Princess will be. She’ll be stuck-up and think that she’s too good to learn. I don’t know what the King and Queen were thinking when they arranged for her to go here, but it can’t be helped now. She obviously won’t be bothered to try to learn anything since her future is already set and all she has to do is look good and please her.”

parents. With a future as good as being the next Queen of the forest, why should she care about education?"

"We understand," Ms. Spot hissed bitterly. "A Princess will be nothing but trouble. I mean, think of how the other children will react!"

"Not to mention, Queen Karenisha and King Makero will be breathing down our necks all the time that she's here," Ms. Zanah added. "If we do one thing to her, like get mad at her apathetic attitude, then we'll be in some very serious trouble with the King and Queen."

"Exactly," Mr. Delaca replied through gritted teeth. "She'll set a bad example for everyone else and make the school year so much harder. But if we try to discipline her, the King and Queen will be very mad, and they could even shut our school down! All because of one snooty, stupid Princess." He growled to himself but continued more calmly, "You can see why it is so important now, I assume. I want you two to be her teachers. Ms. Spot, you can be very strict and I want you to be her homeroom teacher. Ms. Zanah, you will teach math and science for one of her periods. Are you clear on your positions?"

They both nodded quickly.

"Good," he went on, speaking directly to Ms. Spot. "You will need to be strict with her to at least *attempt* to get her to care about education and not act like a snob. Don't let her set a bad example for the other children. But you always have to be gentle and not give the King and Queen any reason to be mad at us. It's a tough job, but I think you'll be able to handle it. Do you understand what you need to do?"

"Yes, Principal Delaca."

"Good. Class will begin soon so both of you should get back to your classrooms. Princess Saderia is coming *today* so make sure you're ready."

As the teachers got up to return to their duties and prepare for the ordeal they would soon have to face, they heard Principal Delaca mutter under his breath, "Princess Saderia will be the worst thing ever to come to WildWorld Elementary."

Chapter Two

New Adventure

The second Saderia blinked open her eyes that day, she was flooded with excitement and anticipation. Although she was enthusiastic and eager to get to the rest of her day, she couldn't help but stop a moment to admire her new and improved room. Ever since she had gotten her parents back, her life had been great. For her, the sky was the limit.

The room around her was everything she had dreamed about: blue walls, cerulean blue carpet and the things in her room were amazing. Her old vanity had been disposed of; she would no longer have to dress up to be anybody but herself, and she liked herself just the way she was. In the vanity's place was a desk where she would do her schoolwork and anything else she wanted to work on. The drawers were filled with pencils, pens, markers, crayons and sheets of paper. On top of the desk sat a computer. There was still the big drawer in a corner of the room where she kept mementos from her old life locked away forever.

Her bed was a beautiful cerulean color that reminded her of the past and the events that had led her to this life, the good parts, though, not the bad parts. The parts that reminded her of her mother, and finding her diary and everything else about her. The pillows and mattress were a paler blue but Saderia loved the color, and the wood supporting her bed was a nice, normal brown, not the elegant deep brown she had been forced to get used to.

Around her room were stacks and stacks of books she had read. She also had a closet with neat shelves that her family had built when her parents had come back. The closet was used to store balls and other fun stuff, along with things she had collected from outside: a nice-looking plant, some fall-colored leaves; she always liked to keep a part of the outdoors with her. The rest of the closet was stacked with a bunch of papers where

she had fantasized about what her first day of school would be like although she mostly used her diary to dream about that.

It definitely didn't look like the girly, frilly room of a Princess, despite the fact that that was what she was. Regardless of her title, Saderia had always wanted to be who she was: a rough tiger girl with a big heart and a longing for the truth. But that hadn't always been granted to her. Only when her parents came back did she finally have the freedom to express herself however she wanted.

Reviewing the catastrophic events that had led her to this wonderful life, she recalled with a shudder the horrible, dark lion named Dastarius, who had captured her parents ten long years ago in order to seize the throne. For the first ten years of her life, Saderia had grown up missing her parents, whom she had presumed were dead. She had had to listen to her Aunt Cia and Uncle Jash, who took care of her then, when they told her how to behave and how to act. She had to act like the stereotypical prissy Princess under their supervision and had longed to be who she really was on the inside. Because of their attitude, she grew a little bitter and resentful of them. Later, she had even suspected them of starting the fire that she thought had killed her parents when all the evidence seemed to point to them. She realized later just how wrong she was. Dastarius was the one who had set it up all along.

The dark lion still haunted her in nightmares; thankfully the nightmares didn't feel as real as other dreams, which guaranteed they wouldn't come to life and Dastarius would stay dead, as he should. But she could still picture the evil lion when she closed her eyes in the dead of night: his dark brown paws holding her down, his pitch black mane hiding him in the darkness, and his amber eyes glaring into hers as he snarled, 'This isn't over, Princess!' right before he was killed by her father.

She struggled to push the image out of her mind and tried to shake off the shivers that raced along her spine at the thought of his last words. It was such an irrational reaction; Dastarius was dead, so it was over and she had nothing to worry about now.

Pushing his last words to the back of her mind, she thought of the things that had happened to lead her to her parents. Eventually Dastarius

had captured her and brought her to the dungeon below his house where she had met her parents for the first time. She couldn't believe it was them, at first, but when she finally believed, they explained everything. Including a strange new power that Saderia and her mother both shared, one of their many similarities.

Her mother, Karenisha, and father, Makero, the old and now restored King and Queen, had told her that a strange power had run in her mother's side of the family, the royal family. The power was the ability to see the future in Dreams and it would have been hard to believe if Saderia hadn't had the Dreams herself. They felt realer than most dreams and they showed events that would happen in the future, even if they weren't very clear.

But Dastarius knew about this power, too, and he knew of only one way to get it: there was an ancient scroll located in her oldest ancestor's tomb with words that, when recited, would give an animal the amazing power. Thankfully, the location of the tomb was very secret and only Karenisha had known where it was. That secret had kept her alive for ten years because Dastarius desperately needed it if he was going to become King, once he staged their deaths. But unfortunately, he had been able to force its location out of Karenisha, and had raced to the tomb.

Saderia, who had escaped before, had come back with the keys to the dungeon and quickly freed them. Then they had rushed to the tomb and confronted Dastarius. Saderia had done everything she could to protect the precious scroll inside it, fighting Dastarius off with all her strength, but the lion had gotten the upper hand and pushed her down. He had almost killed her but at that moment, Karenisha and Makero had appeared and attacked him; Makero had ended the chaos Dastarius had caused by killing him.

But there were still some things Saderia wondered about even today. Like, for instance, who was the animal that had helped her escape Dastarius's dungeon? When she had been captured, she had stayed in the dungeon, slowly beginning to starve. But one night, someone had come to the top of the stairs leading down into the dungeon and told her of an escape route through an air vent in her cell. Later, the animal had helped her find the keys to the cells in Dastarius's dungeon by leaving her a note telling her where to find them. It was vague, but it had definitely helped and she

probably wouldn't have freed her parents without the help he had given her. She hoped she would find out who had helped her someday because she owed him the fabulous life she lived now.

And there was another thing she had learned that was still hanging over her head: In the tomb of her oldest ancestor, Queen Tarae, she had looked at the scroll when her parents were holding off Dastarius. She had read the words to give her the power, although she already had it and didn't need the words. A strange power had been felt through the scroll and when she looked at it a second time, after Dastarius was dead, the words had changed completely and they shone, along with Saderia! Her whole body had glittered and her family had stared at her in awe, making her fur prickle uncomfortably. She had been shocked when she looked down and saw the glow and then she had read the new words on the paper.

"The daughter of the fiftieth generation of the royal family will be gifted with the Power of Dreams stronger than any member of the royal family before her. Her spirit will light the way to a bright, marvelous future. Her soul will guide her through her destined path, and will help lost souls find themselves again. She will be expected to handle her Power responsibly and wisely, and do what she believes is best. The hardships she will face will give her strength. She will go on to do many great things, and Heart, Crown, Scepter, Eye and Dreams will help and guide her," Saderia murmured the words that had been on the scroll; she knew them by heart now.

Saderia knew that *she* was the daughter of the fiftieth generation, and if nothing else, the glowing had definitely assured her that the message had been for her. She didn't know how she could ever live up to the expectations set by the prophecy, but her family apparently had the utmost confidence in her. She had finally accepted it but inside she was still unsure if she was the right animal for the job.

Shaking the thoughts from her mind, she focused on the greatness of this particular day. Today was probably going to be one of the most exciting days of her life: today she would go to school! It probably didn't sound like such a great and amazing thing to the other animals of the forest but it was a big deal for her. Before she had found her parents and gotten her life back, she had had to put up with the incompetent tutors Cia and Uncle Jash had

hired to teach her. Things would definitely be different at her new school, WildWorld Elementary, and maybe she would even get lucky and make a friend. A friend that wasn't her friend just because of her Princess status. Also, she loved to learn everything she could. Reading, as was easy to tell from the piles of books scattered around her room, was something she loved to do in her spare time. She also knew it was best that she learn everything she could if she wanted to be a good Queen someday.

Eagerly, she went to her closet and pulled out the pretty, cerulean blue book bag that her parents had gotten her for her first day of school. She would be starting in the middle of the semester, but they had no doubt that she would adjust and adapt. Last night, her mother had packed the book bag for her and she happily swung it over one shoulder before padding out of her room, her unusually fluffy tail swinging with happiness.

She started walking down the royal-looking hall to the front room. When she got there, she smiled at the hall across from hers, the one that led to her parents' room where her adventure had begun. Then she walked to the right, into the dining room/kitchen where her family was waiting at the gold table, eating breakfast.

“Good morning!” Saderia called warmly, plopping down in her usual seat to begin breakfast. Cia and Uncle Jash sat across from her and Karenisha and Makero sat on either side of her. When she turned to her mother, she was once again struck with their twin-like similarities. Looking at her mother was almost like looking in a mirror to her. They had the same unusually fluffy tails, the same yellow-orange fur, and the same amber eyes.

“Excited, huh?” Karenisha said, with a grin.

“What was your first clue?” Uncle Jash asked, raising an eyebrow and smiling.

“I think it'd have to be the glow in her eyes,” she replied warmly.

“Oh great, she's glowing again?” Cia exclaimed, grinning.

“She's been glowing ever since she found out she'd be going to school,” Makero observed. “Just not as literally as in the tomb.”

“Correction, I started glowing when I found out you guys were alive,” Saderia told them and they smiled at her warmly. “It had nothing to

do with a prophecy.”

As she looked between Karenisha and Makero, her mother’s amber eyes and her father’s green eyes sparkling, she couldn’t help but smile widely. It had been a long time since she had rescued them and they had defeated Dastarius inside the tomb...and of course, learned about the prophecy. But in the time since then, her parents had grown more accustomed to living in the forest, with more freedoms than they had ever imagined when they were locked up in the dungeon. They still looked out at the world in awe, as if they couldn’t believe it was really there, as if it were a great privilege to see it. But they had stopped jumping at every sound and could walk through the forest without stepping over every blade of grass as if it might hide their enemy. They were still wary, but they were able to hide that and continue being the amazing King and Queen they were.

“Same as us,” Makero told her happily, and Karenisha nodded in agreement.

“We know how excited you’ve been lately about going to school and making friends,” Karenisha added. “But don’t get your hopes up too high. Not all things are as easy as what you think.”

“Yeah, I’m sure nothing’s as easy as doing what I did to get to this life,” Saderia replied sarcastically. More kindly, she added, “I know I shouldn’t get too excited and I know it will be hard fitting in, but it’s an adventure! I like adventures, even if they are scary sometimes.”

“It will definitely be difficult,” Cia warned. “Especially since you’re a Princess. I wasn’t just being naïve and cold when I kept you from going to school; I had a reason. Saderia, the other animals might treat you differently than how you’d want.”

“We all know how much you hate that,” Uncle Jash agreed.

Saderia sighed, a little crestfallen. “I know it will be difficult at first, but I’m hoping I can convince them to see me as I am, and not just as something with the label ‘Princess’ slapped onto it.”

“She’s just like you,” Makero said to Karenisha with a smile.

“In more ways than one,” she agreed, looking at her daughter.

Saderia beamed then got a determined look on her face. “I think I’ll be able to convince them. It might take some work, but then, it wouldn’t be worthwhile without work.”

“That’s the attitude of a great Queen,” Karenisha praised her.

Her smile lit up the room. “Really?”

“Of course. Do you know how long it takes some animals to realize just that little bit of wise information?”

She shook her head.

“A long time,” Makero laughed.

“Karenisha should definitely know,” Cia agreed, grinning. “It took her the longest time just to learn something simple called maturity.”

Karenisha glared at her with mock anger. “It took you the longest time to learn something called intelligence,” she retorted, grinning when Cia glared back at her.

Saderia laughed but then broke off, seeming a little less confident as Cia’s words sunk in. “Do you really think they’d treat me so much differently? I mean, would anybody see me as me?”

“It’s always hard to get that established at first,” Karenisha told her. “And there are always some animals who can’t get that, but eventually it’ll probably work out.”

“But it will be tough at first,” Cia agreed.

Saderia sighed, wondering how she could expect to be treated normally when she was not only a Princess, but a Princess with a prophecy hanging over her head. It was a good thing the forest didn’t know about the last part. But being a Princess would be hard enough to deal with on its own. “I wish I could be normal,” she muttered.

Cia raised an eyebrow. “Most animals wish they could be the Princess,” she remarked.

“They don’t know what it’s like,” she retorted.

Karenisha flicked her with her tail. “Don’t let this ruin your first day, all right? Didn’t you just say that nothing without work is worth it?”

“I suppose, but now that I think about it, I’m going to be really fed up with everybody calling me Princess and bowing to me and stuff.”

“Not everybody is like that,” Karenisha told her reassuringly.

“I hope so.” She took a deep breath. “Well, I’m ready. You guys could at least give me some more information about what I’m walking into, though. I tried to ask but you won’t tell me anything, saying I’ll have to ‘wait and see!'”

“It would spoil the surprise,” Makero said fondly. “Besides, I thought you liked adventures.”

“Half of the time adventure means walking into the unknown,” Karenisha agreed.

Saderia smiled. “You’re right.” She quickly jumped off of the chair. “I’m ready to leave!”

Karenisha and Cia exchanged a glance, her mother’s amber eyes and her aunt’s blue eyes both sparkling with laughter. Makero got up from his chair and started toward the door, smiling at his daughter as she eagerly followed him. He beckoned to the others with his tail. “Are you going to keep her waiting?”

“I guess that wouldn’t be too smart,” Uncle Jash laughed, following after them with Karenisha and Cia.

Saderia’s parents took the lead as they emerged from the house. They all started walking to town, using the dirt path that led from their house, which was located far into the woods, in the west part of the forest. The woods on either side of the path were light green in the early morning light, wafting smells of fresh, healthy plant scents toward them, though it was chilled by the coldness of winter. Somewhere in a tree a bird sang its song of the morning and another responded from a different tree. Saderia smiled, enjoying the way nature was so fresh and reassuring; it gave her energy.

After a few minutes of walking, the path curved and led them into town, and from there they took another path off to the side, leading deeper into the woods. Saderia and her family kept walking on the path as it curved

northward and finally stopped several feet from the school. The young tiger Princess stared in admiration at the big school building right in front of her.

Resting in a clump of woods toward the back was the school, a big, orange building. It was a T-shape, with a big, main part extending toward them while the rest of it was farther back, looking like one huge hallway. Supported by a little foundation, it had a short flight of stairs leading to the double doors in front. The part where they were standing was a clearing, nothing too fanciful, just a big grassy place for students to meet before school.

“This place is amazing!” she exclaimed, her tail curling up in delight.

Karenisha and Makero nodded encouragingly. “It sure is,” Karenisha agreed.

“It’s nothing too fancy but it’s got a good school system,” Makero added, “which is why we thought it’d be best for you.”

“It’s great!”

“I would have preferred something a little more...” Cia broke off when she noticed Karenisha’s look and said instead, “But this school looks pretty good, too.”

Uncle Jash grinned. “Glad you like it, Saderia. Looks like we finally did something right.”

“I want to see inside!” Saderia exclaimed, bounding forward. Her family hurried behind her as she rushed up the steps to the school building, ignoring the gasps of surprise from the few students who were already standing in the clearing in front of the school.

“Saderia, hold on,” Karenisha warned. “We should talk to the principal to know where you should go first.”

“Oh, right,” Saderia said, stopping her paws but not her excitement. When she stepped eagerly through the double doors, she looked around at the front part of her new school.

The doors opened up into a huge atrium with clean white floors and strong walls. Display cases lined the left and right walls, filled with different awards bearing students’ names below it. It proved just how great

this school would probably be, to Saderia. At the back were two hallways leading off into separate hallways with classrooms on each one. On the left side of the atrium was a door leading into some sort of office.

“This way.” Makero signaled for them to follow him into the office. Saderia stuck close to her father as he spoke to the receptionist behind the big desk in the first part of the office. Feeling excited, she smiled, but when she looked up at the receptionist, she frowned. The animal’s mouth was a hard line and her eyes were disapproving, but she pointed them in the direction they wanted to go.

“Principal Delaca’s office is down the hallway, to the left and then it’s the last door on the left,” she told them, bowing to the King and Queen before they left, as most animals thought was required. But she didn’t look very happy and Saderia wondered if there were more animals that resented them for being royalty.

Her parents didn’t seem to have noticed, or if they had, they simply didn’t react. Completely unbothered, they happily led Saderia down the hall after telling Cia and Uncle Jash to wait for them outside. Saderia said goodbye to them before walking down the hallway after her parents.

She trailed behind Karenisha and Makero, noticing the first door on the left said ‘Nurse’s Office’ and then there were other doors with staff names on them, but none were familiar. At the end of the hall, they turned to the left onto another long hallway which they followed. Most of the doors on the right were meeting rooms and there were only a few doors on the left, but when they reached the end of the hall there was, as the receptionist had told them, a door with the words ‘Principal’s Office’ engraved on it. The door opposite it, on the right hall, Saderia noticed, had the words ‘Assistant Principal’s Office’ inscribed on it but she couldn’t see inside.

Her parents stepped into the principal’s office and Saderia stayed behind them until she found herself standing in a dark room with one window on the left, the shades drawn. A big brown desk stood with stacks and stacks of papers covering it and a name plate that read ‘Principal Delaca.’ The walls were filled with all sorts of awards and credentials and there were two chairs in front of the desk. Behind the big desk sat a pitch

black panther with yellow eyes that flicked to her face and narrowed the second she stepped in.

“King Makero, Queen Karenisha,” the principal greeted them formally, bowing like all the others.

“Principal Delaca,” Karenisha greeted him with a friendlier tone. “We’ve spoken before. Now I’d like you to meet my daughter, Saderia.” She stepped a pace away from Saderia and the panther’s yellow eyes bore angrily into her.

“Yes, how wonderful it is to meet the Princess,” he replied, the smile he plastered on his face looking more like a grimace. “I’m your principal, Mr. Delaca.”

Saderia suddenly felt incredibly shy and uncomfortable. Ducking her head a little she stammered, “Good to meet you too. Um, but you can... you can just call me Saderia.”

Mr. Delaca looked faintly surprised but he quickly composed his features to appear expressionless as he replied, “Very well. Saderia.” He shot a glance at the King and Queen and then turned back to her. “Your teacher, Ms. Spot, has her classroom on the left hallway. Go down to the end and her classroom is on the second hallway on the left, room 312.” The principal practically spat the words at her and his eyes narrowed further into a glare as if he were daring her to challenge him.

Saderia swallowed uncomfortably and felt anger and confusion welling up inside her. This was her first day! What had she done to deserve the principal’s anger and frustration on the first day?! She stared at him. Was it just her imagination or did he seem resentful of her specifically, as if he were frustrated and annoyed simply by her being here. But *why*? She hadn’t done anything at all to be treated like that. She narrowed her eyes back at him but frowned, knowing she couldn’t do anything else, especially with her parents in the room.

“Got that?” he finally asked.

Saderia gave a brief nod. “Got it. 312.”

Karenisha smiled at her and quickly nuzzled her. “I just know you’ll have an interesting first day!” she exclaimed warmly.

“Don’t be afraid,” Makero added gently. “Everything new is a little scary at first. You’ll meet some cool animals who might be your friends, I imagine.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Saderia replied a little shakily. “Thanks, Dad.”

They gave her an encouraging smile before leaving the principal’s office, calling goodbye and that they’d see her when they came to pick her up in the afternoon. She stared after them but then the door shut behind them, leaving her alone in the office with Principal Delaca.

He glared at her hatefully and she turned around to face him as he started speaking. “Princess Saderia, all of this is probably meaningless to you, but you need to get something straight. None of us are your slaves and you need to set a good example. I won’t put up with anything from you.” Anger and contempt sparked from him and her instinct told her to definitely watch out around him.

Saderia’s eyes widened in distress that the principal was already growling at her. Maybe school wouldn’t be so fun after all.

“Is that clear?” he growled.

She nodded meekly, unable to say a word.

“Good,” he practically spat. “Get to class.”

Saderia scrambled to get out of the office quickly, letting out a sigh when the door closed behind her, separating her from those angry yellow eyes. But as soon as she was away from him, she felt angry; she really hated it when animals judged others without even getting to know them. It was so annoying! Hating the way Mr. Delaca had treated her, she felt furious but unfortunately there was nothing she could do about it. She would just have to deal with it. “Oh well, I guess I’ve seen much worse than this,” she sighed.

Then she froze as the door leading to the Assistant Principal’s office hesitantly opened, and a bright, cream-colored lioness stepped out. As soon as the lioness caught sight of Saderia, she did a double take and gasped. But almost in the same instant her sharp features relaxed into a knowing kind of smile and she glanced at her coolly, her cold, ice blue eyes staring directly into Saderia’s.

“You must be the Princess,” she said smoothly in a cool, but somehow sarcastic voice. Saderia noticed her ice blue eyes narrow as she said it and she swore she saw an angry fire flash in them before they cooled again. Her intuition, which she had grown to trust, revealed flashes of intense hatred, fury and loathing rolling off the lioness almost in waves. Listening to her instinct, she felt she needed to get out of there and fast, but why? And why did the lioness have such hatred for her?

Staying put, Saderia felt indignation enter her mind and cover up her instinct; did yet *another* staff member hate her? But she still felt afraid and upset and a little alone so she just nodded shyly, muttering, “You can just call me Saderia, Miss....” She looked up questioningly, trying to smile a little at the lioness. Maybe if *she* were friendly then others would be friendly back.

“You can just call me Lolista,” the lioness replied. “No Ms.”

“Okay...”

The lioness relaxed a little more and tried to seem friendlier, though it took a visible amount of effort.

“Do you need help finding your classroom?” she offered as calmly as possibly.

“Um...Mr. Delaca told me where but...I guess...”

Without another word, the lioness, Lolista, stepped forward and began walking down the hall without looking back to see if she followed. Saderia did follow her, keeping pace with her as the lioness walked her out of the office and down the left hall.

“Oh, and just in case you hadn’t noticed, we’re not your little dollies, Princess. So get used to acting like the rest of us. You’re no more special than any of us just because you’re a pathetic cry-baby Princess who throws a fit if she can’t get her way,” Lolista told her coldly, her eyes meaner than before but her mouth turned up in a sneer.

It was quiet between them for a long time and Saderia tried to work up the courage to ask what her and Mr. Delaca’s problem was with her. She was still feeling very uncomfortable and upset but she finally managed to

murmur, “Um, Ms....I mean...” She trailed off, looking down in embarrassment.

The lioness let out a little, humorless laugh. “Just Lolista, Princess,” she reminded her.

Saderia narrowed her eyes. “Well, my name’s Saderia, not Princess, Ms. Lolista.” she replied indignantly, emphasizing the ‘Ms.’ “Why don’t you just give me a break? I mean, what’s your problem with me? Did you and the principal just get together before I came in and decide, ‘Hey, let’s mess with the next kid that walks in here?’”

Lolista’s eyes narrowed and she hissed while Saderia backed up uneasily. She was about to apologize, obviously having gone too far, when Lolista relaxed again, glancing at her out of the corner of her eye. She raised her eyebrows, her ice blue eyes clearly amused. “Well, what do you know? A Princess with an attitude.” She curled her lips up in that sarcastic half-smile of hers.

Saderia didn’t know what to say for a long time but then narrowed her eyes and coolly replied, “Look, I just want to fit in here, and already I have animals mad at me. I didn’t do anything to you or Mr. Delaca as far as I know and you have no right to judge me without even knowing me. This isn’t exactly easy on me, so if I have an attitude, too bad. I’m trying my best.”

Lolista let out a little laugh. “You may be all right for a Princess,” she responded. “Maybe.”

Saderia stayed silent, narrowing her eyes and keeping a few paces away from her.

The lioness’s tone was contemptuous and thickly sarcastic as she said, “Oh, relax already. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

Lolista rolled her eyes. “Why would I want to hurt you? Like you said, I don’t even know you, not to mention the fact that if I did hurt you, your Mommy and Daddy would be angry, and getting the Queen and King mad probably wouldn’t be wise.”

Saderia looked unsure. “Why should I trust you after what you’ve already said?”

“Why should I help you after what you’ve already said?”

Saderia hissed. “What are you talking about? You haven’t helped me at all!”

“I haven’t helped you yet, but if you keep your mouth shut long enough I could tell you something that might help.”

Saderia glared at her angrily but said nothing.

“Good,” Lolista said, sneering at her. “Now, here’s the deal. Most of the school is going to hate you, like it or not. You’re going to have to work harder than anyone here if you want them to...whatever, *like* and *respect* you. I wouldn’t even bother with it since I wouldn’t care, but you might, so I’m just letting you know.”

“But why do they hate me?!” Saderia burst out, her eyes widening again. “What did I do?”

“Well, their reasons for being mad at you differ from mine, but I’ll let you figure it out. It’s not that hard. I might as well see how smart you are.”

Saderia turned away bitterly, not bothering to reply. Lolista just rolled her eyes.

“Fine, hate me. That works for me and it obviously works for you.”

“I don’t *hate* you exactly, but maybe I’d like you more if you were a little nicer.”

“What do I care if you like me or not? And, sorry, but *me* and *nice* don’t mix well.”

“Then what are you even doing here?”

Lolista narrowed her eyes and looked at her cynically. “What are you even doing here, *Princess*? ”

Saderia glared back at her. “I have my reasons.”

“And I have mine.”

Saderia lashed her tail. “Fine, *touché*.” She was really starting to dislike this lioness. Mr. Delaca was kind of mean to her but Lolista was

really starting to bug her and she couldn't shake the feeling that she was nothing but trouble.

Saderia didn't speak to her again and instead looked around at her new school. They had already passed a huge room with windows that showed the room was full of stacks and stacks of books, like a library. The school had a library? She began to cheer up at the thought because she liked books and libraries. Maybe this wouldn't be so terrible after all...but time would surely tell. She was aware that her original visions of how perfect going to school would be were unrealistic but maybe it wouldn't be as bad as her first encounters. After all, she still had her teachers to meet, along with the students in the classrooms.

They passed a few hallways leading down into different classrooms on the right, and Saderia could only guess at what they contained. She began to feel excited again as she was led down the hall because she did want to see what her new classroom would look like and what her peers would be like. Without speaking, Lolista led her down the second hallway at the end of the hall. "Think you can find your way now?" she asked in a way that made Saderia suspect the lioness thought of her as stupid.

She narrowed her eyes indignantly. "Of course I can find my way now," she retorted. "I'm not an idiot, you know."

Lolista smirked. "Could've fooled me. Just remember, your teachers and classmates will treat you differently. The students will either hate you or idolize you. The teachers will most likely hate you. Don't say I didn't warn you."

Saderia scowled but said nothing; instead she stalked away in what she hoped was the right direction to lead her to her classroom. She wanted to prove she could find her way.

"It's on the right side, Princess," Lolista called, not bothering to disguise the contemptuous laughter in her tone.

Saderia closed her eyes in frustration but veered to the right, forcing herself to hold her head high and keep her tail up, grasping at the dignity she still had. She was more than a little grateful when Lolista finally left, chuckling to herself, back down the hall and out of sight. Then she was

furious at herself for acting so rudely and unintelligently in front of Lolista. But who did that lioness think she was anyway?

Lashing her tail in frustration one last time, Saderia tried to clear her thoughts of the annoyance and distress she felt after her first encounters. Then she walked toward her classroom on the very end of the hall, identifying it by the plate on the wall beside the door: 312. She took a deep breath and stepped forward, making a silent vow to herself to work hard to gain the respect of her peers and teachers. She told herself she would keep going even when there were disappointments and hard times. She had gone through worse so she could go through this. She might even have fun, or make a friend, as she had wanted for such a long time.

When she reached her classroom, she breathed in deeply. She probably didn't need to worry about giving up; her pride would never allow that. So, sucking up her dignity and trying to hide her fear, she stepped through the door into her next adventure.

Chapter Three

Prejudice

Cool air greeted Saderia as she stepped inside and gazed around at the big classroom. At the front, right beside the entrance, a large whiteboard stretched across the length of the room. It was covered with words in different colored white board markers. There was a schedule boxed off in one corner and right above it was where homework was written. Across the room, beside the white board, was a big desk that Saderia presumed was the teacher's desk. It was stacked with papers, while a can of pencils sat on the corner and a big calendar lay open across the desk.

Then there was a big, teal rug in one corner of the room, surround by bookcases, some holding normal paperback books and others supporting huge textbooks or dictionaries. There was a rocking chair on one end of the carpet and a book was propped up against the back of it.

There were posters all around the room about things they'd learn, and cubbies lined the back wall, stuffed with papers and textbooks. There were a lot of different colored book bags hanging on hooks below each of the cubbies and Saderia wondered which one she would have. Facing the white board were several desks all lined up front to back, with about five chairs in a row. Most of the desks were filled already and Saderia's gaze quickly took in the different animals seated there.

In the chair up front, closest to the teacher's desk was a cheetah with bright green eyes, although she looked a little different from normal cheetahs for some reason. She was bending over a magazine and snacking on something she must have brought. Behind her was a black panther with dark blue eyes, glaring at the back of her head and breaking his pencils on his desk. The cheetah's tail flicked and the panther sneered at the back of her head before he threw a pencil bit at her. Faster than lightning, the cheetah whipped around and grabbed the pencil bit before it could hit her, then smashed it to pieces between her two paws.

She smirked at the panther and jeered, “You should be as fast at throwing as you are with crying to your Mommy, you know.”

The panther glared at her. “Shut up, Loki. I’m really sick of you.”

“The feeling’s mutual, Grath,” she replied, turning back around. “Leave me alone or I’ll do to your head what I did to that pencil bit.”

“Like you could,” he muttered. “Stupid cheepard.” But he didn’t bother her anymore.

The cheetah flicked her tail but said nothing else, focusing on her magazine again. There were a few other animals in the room but Saderia’s gaze skimmed over them and she focused on three girls: a lioness, a panther and a leopard. The three were huddled together and giggling in the second row.

“I bet she’s really pretty and fashionable,” said the panther with light blue eyes.

“You’re probably right, Lily,” said the yellow lioness, her pale green eyes sparkling. “She’ll make a great member of our group.”

“And we’ll be even more popular, Lizzie,” the leopard agreed. She looked at the lioness hopefully with her grayish blue eyes, as if waiting to be praised.

The cheetah, Loki, laughed from across the room. “She’s right, you know. Believe me, you three *need* a popularity boost.”

The lioness, Lizzie, glared at her. “Do you always have to make a comment, Loki?”

“Yeah, Loki,” agreed the panther named Lily.

Loki rolled her eyes. “See, Lily, that’s the problem with followers like yourself. They have no minds so they just copy their stupid leader, thus sounding just as stupid, if not stupider.”

Lily hissed at her, “Cheepard,” and turned away. The lioness continued to glare at her and snapped, “Like you’re the most popular girl in school, Loki.”

The cheetah arched an eyebrow. “I never said I was, Lizzie. And yet, I don’t care.”

The three turned away from her angrily and continued talking to each other, their voices rising in excitement once again.

Saderia's gaze wandered away from them and toward the back of the room where she focused in on a lion sitting at the very back, on the far left end of the row. His desk was scooted away from all the others, she noticed, and the lion had his head down on his desk, between his paws. His fur was dark brown but he had a darker brown tuft of a mane on his head and on the tip of his tail, which he kept wrapped tightly around his paws.

His face was hidden from view and Saderia was instantly spiked with curiosity and concern for some reason she couldn't understand. She felt drawn to him in an odd way and wondered if maybe they could be friends. But he didn't seem to be too keen to talk to anyone and he looked upset. Wondering why, Saderia felt concerned and wanted to see what was wrong but she suddenly felt too shy to talk to anyone, much less the dark brown lion.

At that moment, a strangely spotted leopard walked to the front of the room and stared at Saderia with moss green eyes, narrowing them as she continued to stare. "Come in," she finally mouthed, and motioned with her tail for Saderia to step over to her.

Uncertainly, Saderia padded toward the leopard whom she assumed was the teacher. Remembering the way Mr. Delaca and Lolista had acted toward her, and Lolista's warning, she was already cautious and this teacher didn't look any friendlier than the other two.

As she stepped forward, all eyes instantly flicked to her and gasps of surprise, delight and disbelief came from all around the room. Everyone was staring at her... everybody but the dark brown lion, who kept his head down. Saderia felt uncomfortable under their fixed stares and kept her eyes on the ground, her ears flattened to her head as she told herself not to back down. She tried to smile at the classmates, remembering that she might have to work to gain their respect, but she couldn't see whether or not she had managed to put on a friendly act.

"I'm Ms. Spot," the leopard teacher introduced herself. She glared out at her class, particularly the lioness, panther and leopard girls who were still giggling together. "I'm sure most of you have heard rumors about the

new student, and they are indeed true. Class, I would like to introduce you to Princess Saderia.”

Squeals of shock, more gasps and excited murmurs broke out around the classroom but Saderia barely noticed them. Her gaze stayed focused on the lion and she blinked in shock when his whole body jerked stiffly, making every hair on his back stand up. His head snapped up the instant the word ‘Princess’ was out of Ms. Spot’s mouth. His amber eyes stared directly into hers, his expression a mix of shock, horror, terror and utter disbelief. Saderia stared back at him, shocked by the reaction, and he never tore his gaze away from hers, staring at her as if he couldn’t believe it. His expression never changed.

Saderia felt confusion and anxiety cloud her mind, although mostly bewilderment. She was a Princess, so she could understand that anyone would be shocked and disbelieving if she walked right into their classroom. But what about the expressions of horror and even terror? Was he *afraid* of her? What reason would he have to fear her?

As she stared back at him, unable to look away, his expression changed from disbelief to dread and acceptance, then horror, and he quickly tore his gaze away from her. He hid his face between his paws again and seemed to curl in on himself, although Saderia noticed that he was still peeking at her from between his paws.

She looked away from him, too, still feeling dismayed and bewildered by the immediate reaction he had had to her name. Then she realized that the teacher, along with everyone else, was staring at her and she felt her face grow hot in embarrassment and shyness. How long had they been staring? “Um...you can just call me Saderia,” she stammered. “You don’t have to say Princess first.”

By then, the three girls were all squealing to each other in high, excited voices, and the panther was glaring at her, snapping another pencil in his paw. Everyone else was still staring or whispering to someone beside them. The lion was still hiding behind his paws. No one seemed to have heard what she said. The only one that seemed unchanged was the cheetah, who sat back in her chair and continued to read her magazine as if it were just another new student coming to the school, and *not* the Princess.

Ms. Spot, her moss green eyes still narrowed, nodded slowly. “All right, Saderia, if that’s what you wish to be called.”

“It is,” she said nervously.

Ms. Spot nodded curtly and turned back to her class, but she still spoke to her, rather than to the other students. “Everyone, Saderia is, in fact, the Princess of the forest but all of you are on the same level as her in our classroom. She will not be treated any differently because of her title and she will be expected to follow the rules just like any of you. She’ll be expected to earn your respect and friendship like any other animal.” She glanced around at all of them sternly and then glared at Saderia. Turning back to the class, she said, “All of you should introduce yourselves to our new student. We’ll start with Loki.” She turned to the cheetah sitting near her desk on the front row and narrowed her eyes at the magazine.

Loki raised an eyebrow and set the magazine in her desk. She grinned at Saderia then in a kind of haughty but friendly way. “Hey, Saderia, I’m Loki.”

“Hi, Loki,” Saderia replied in a nice, but quiet voice.

Loki grinned. “I like to play sports and stuff, how about you?”

The lioness from across the room rolled her eyes. “Please, Loki, she’s the Princess. Why would she want to play sports and get dirty like you?”

“Actually, I like sports and stuff a lot,” Saderia replied to Loki. “I like playing outside.”

“And getting dirty?” Loki asked, raising her eyebrows as she used the lioness’s word.

“I don’t mind,” she replied.

Loki grinned her haughty/friendly smile and said, “Then I’ll see you on the recess field. Good luck.”

“So uncouth,” the lioness muttered of Loki.

Ms. Spot glared at the lioness who had spoken out of turn then and moved on to the panther behind Loki, nodding at him to introduce himself. Saderia swallowed hard; she could sense his dislike of her.

The panther glared at Saderia angrily but for once Saderia wasn't fazed by it and met his stare as he snarled, "You're no better than me, you pathetic Princess. I'm Grath, and don't you forget it."

"Grath!" Ms. Spot growled at him, her eyes flashing.

Loki rolled her eyes at him. "Oh, I don't think she's going to forget you, Grath. You're the idiot kid who tries to act tough but is really, obviously, a wimp."

"You should talk," Grath growled at her. "Go ahead and make her think you're so great when you're not! You didn't tell her the real story."

"I can tell her what I want."

"Well, then I'll tell her," Grath went on, ignoring her.

Loki let out a little, humorless laugh. "Go ahead, it's not like I care."

Grath growled at her. "Fine." He turned to Saderia with a mean, conceited sneer. "The real story on Loki is that she's poor and lives with a bunch of losers and on top of that, she's a half-breed."

Loki glared at him. "What'd you say about my family?"

But he ignored that and smirked at her. "Are you so high and mighty now that your secret's out?"

"It's really not that secret, moron. And I'm still high and mightier than you, but I suppose that isn't saying much."

He snarled at her but Ms. Spot hissed at both of them and glared at Grath. "Knock it off, both of you! Grath, detention, and if I hear one more word out of you, you're going to Principal Delaca's office."

Grath turned away from her, muttering angrily to himself while Loki sneered at him. "Ha ha," she mouthed.

Grath snarled and turned to Ms. Spot. "How come *she* doesn't get punished?!"

"Moving on," Ms. Spot said, ignoring him. She went over to a few more students that Saderia barely paid attention to, too busy thinking about Loki.

She kind of liked her attitude and the way she wasn't so easily bothered. Besides that, she hadn't treated her like a Princess, but as a

normal animal. She was also the only one so far to call her by her name and not ‘Princess.’ Beginning to think that maybe she and the cheetah could be friends, she began to smile, but then she thought about what Grath had said. If it were true, she decided, then why would she care anyway? As long as Loki treated her like a friend, there really wasn’t much else to consider, right?

Then she glanced at the dark brown lion in the back and was again consumed with curiosity. Why had he looked at her that way? And why did he seem so despondent?

Snapping back into focus, she noticed that Ms. Spot had moved on to the three girls who had been giggling before and hadn’t ceased yet. She thought she heard Ms. Spot sigh as she stepped up to them and hastily told them to introduce themselves.

“Hi, Princess Saderia, I’m Lizzie,” said the lioness excitedly. “You can come hang out with us instead of the other riffraff around here.” She shot a glance at Loki but the cheetah didn’t respond except to roll her eyes. But then Lizzie’s gaze moved to the lion and her eyes narrowed. He didn’t respond either and just pulled his paws more tightly over his face.

“Yeah, Princess,” the panther agreed happily. “I’m Lily, by the way.”

Both of them turned toward the leopard who seemed a little uneasy. She smiled hesitantly at Saderia. “Hi, Princess,” she said shyly. “It must be cool to rule the forest. Oh, um, I’m Lisa.”

“Hi,” Saderia replied, feeling that she would have Princess problems from these three and sighing inwardly. It would be some time before she was treated normally, though, so she sucked it up and tried to look forward to the rest of the day and the school year. She could be optimistic, especially about making friends, maybe with Loki or even the lion in the back.

Occupied with those thoughts, she stopped paying attention and just muttered hi when she thought she needed to. But when Ms. Spot finally came to the dark brown lion, she snapped back into attention and focused on him. Ms. Spot tapped him gently with her tail and he looked up at her from where he was slumped over his desk, his amber eyes clearly terrified.

“It’s okay,” Ms. Spot murmured to him gently. “Just introduce yourself. No one’s going to hurt you.”

The lion shrank down even farther in his seat, and Saderia could see that every part of him was tense, as if he were scared stiff. Maybe he was. Her eyes were wide with intrigue and dismay, wondering what could possibly be causing him to act this way. Was he just really, really shy? It seemed to be much more than just shyness, as she could easily guess from the fur standing up along his back. He was even shaking a little!

“I promise, it’ll be all right,” Ms. Spot was murmuring, seeming just as confused by his reaction as Saderia was. “Just tell her your name.”

“What a wimp,” Lizzie whispered to Lily. “He’s scared of her!”

“What a freak!” Lily agreed in a hushed voice, giggling with her. “Right, Lisa?”

“Right,” Lisa said quickly.

The lion narrowed his eyes; they flicked to Saderia’s face and then back down again. “Dashenirus,” he muttered quietly, hiding again as soon as he could.

Ms. Spot gave him an encouraging smile and glared at Lizzie, Lily and Lisa before beginning to walk back to the front of the room.

“Hey, Princess, do you want to know the story on the freak?” Lizzie announced, referring to Dashenirus.

Saderia narrowed her eyes, still wanting to get to know the lion better and find out what was bothering him so much. She didn’t even know him but she didn’t appreciate Lizzie calling him names.

But the lioness continued without Saderia’s consent. “He’s a complete freak! He just stays over in that corner all the time and he never talks to anybody! He’s stupid, too. And this is the craziest thing about him: he lives out in the woods because he has no parents!”

“Yeah,” Lily agreed. “Apparently his Mom left him a long time ago and now something happened to his Dad!”

Saderia’s eyes widened in surprise and her gaze quickly jumped to Dashenirus, who flinched when she said it. He muttered something too low to be heard, but didn’t look up.

“He’s a freak!” Lisa quickly put in. “He stays away from everyone like we’re the freaky ones but it’s him who’s so messed up!”

Anger flared in Saderia at what they said. How dare anyone insult him about something so personal? How dare they judge him without really knowing him, probably the way they were judging her? She glared at them, letting out a hiss and was about to say something to them but Loki beat her to it.

“Hey, Lizzie,” she called. “Why don’t you and your cronies go pick on somebody of your own low I.Q.?”

Lizzie’s mouth dropped open and she glared at Loki. “Are you saying that loser’s smarter than me?!”

Rolling her eyes, Loki replied. “No duh. But I guess that’s obvious, considering a brick is smarter than you.”

Lizzie stared at her. “*What did you just say to me?*”

“Oh, please,” Loki mimicked Lizzie from earlier, then dropped back into her normal voice. “You’re stupid and superficial, Lizzie, not deaf. You heard what I said.”

Before Lizzie could reply, Ms. Spot snarled at her and slapped her desk with her tail. “Lizzie, you have detention for two *months*! If I ever hear anything like that from you again, you’re going to the principal’s office and depending on what else you do, you could even get expelled. Think about that during detention.”

“Whatever,” she muttered, looking away from the teacher.

Ms. Spot glared at her. “What did you say, Lizzie?”

She sighed. “I said ‘Yes, Ms. Spot.’”

Muttering to herself, Ms. Spot returned to the front of the room to stand beside Saderia. “You can take your seat now,” she told her tersely. “Put your book bag up in the back in an empty cubby. Get out what you brought—I’ll bring you the rest—then sit in the empty seat beside Loki.” She looked the cheetah in the eye. “Behave.”

Loki shrugged. “Hey, I just call it as I see it. But fine,” she added when Ms. Spot narrowed her eyes, “I’ll *behave*.”

Taking a deep, silent breath, Saderia started toward the back of the room, which meant she would have to walk by Dashenirus since he was sitting in the back. He seemed to realize this, too, because he huddled himself even further into a ball and refused to look up, every part of him tense with fear.

Saderia walked down the line of desks, ignoring the calls of the animals she passed. When she found herself inches away from the lion, she felt the need to be extra careful. It felt like she was walking on broken glass as she picked her way past his seat. She couldn't help but stare at him and was sure her face had an expression of open curiosity.

When she was almost past him, she jerked her gaze away from him and focused on the cubbies at the back, but since she wasn't paying attention to being careful, her tail accidentally flicked him. He jumped and let out a tiny, inaudible gasp at the same time she did and both of them whipped their heads around to stare at each other. Each of their amber gazes was a mixture of surprise and anxiety.

Saderia felt a jolt as she realized how close she was to him. She seemed to realize that at the same time he did because he tensed and leaned away from her. For a moment, Saderia wondered if he was going to run but he stayed put and managed to look away from her, hiding again. Still shocked, Saderia looked away, too, and moved past him, being more careful this time.

When she was a good distance away from him, by an empty cubby, she let out the breath she just realized she had been holding. She glanced back at Dashenirus out of the corner of her eye and saw that he hadn't moved from his position, but she did notice that he was staring back at her from behind his paws.

She tried to smile at him but his expression and manner didn't change. She quickly turned away and concentrated on what she was doing, hanging her book bag on the hook beneath the cubby and pulling out the folders and notebooks her parents had bought her. Once she had all of the things she would need, she strode to the front of the room where her new seat was, hurrying up past the row with Grath and Loki on it.

But as she glided up to her seat, passing Grath, he stuck out a black paw and she let out a little gasp as she tripped and began to fall, just barely catching herself. She turned and glared at Grath. “What was that for?” she hissed angrily.

All eyes were turned toward her and Grath, and this time she noticed that Dashenirus was staring too, though his expression was unreadable. Loki leaned backward to look Grath in the eye. “Dude, you have major problems,” she said to him. “Did you get dropped on your head as a cub, or what?”

“How dare you trip me?” Saderia echoed, glaring at him. “I didn’t do anything to you.” She was getting kind of fed up with the way everyone was acting toward her.

Ms. Spot was hovering over him instantly. “Principal’s office,” she hissed through her teeth. “Now.”

Rolling his eyes, Grath slumped out of his chair and out the door, leaving the rest of the room to stare after him in silence. Ms. Spot let out an angry sigh. “He’s been acting that way since the beginning of the school year,” she muttered. “I just hate it when students act like that.”

“Hey, you and me both,” Loki agreed to Ms. Spot. “I can try to keep an eye on him when he comes back, if you want.”

“No, Loki,” Ms. Spot sighed. “I can’t ask you to do that, though I imagine you’d do it on your own.” She smiled fondly at the cheetah who grinned back. “But anyway,” she continued, “I want you to take on a bigger job. I want you to make sure Princess Saderia knows her way around the school.”

“No problem,” Loki replied, leaning back in her chair. She patted the seat beside her with her tail, indicating for Saderia to sit down.

Saderia quickly dumped her stuff on her desk and hopped onto her chair to sit and listen. She stared at the pile of stuff, for once feeling overwhelmed at the thought of having to catch up with everybody, and wondering how she should organize this stuff. She quickly glanced at the schedule on the board to try to familiarize herself with it and have one less thing to worry about.

7:30-8:00 Homeroom
8:00-8:30 Art Area: Art Gym
Drama, Music, Library
8:30-10:15 Reading and History
10:15-11:30 Math and Science
11:30-12:15 Lunch
12:15-1:00 Recess
1:00-2:00 Math and Science
2:00-2:15 Pack up
2:30 Dismissal

Feeling a bit more optimistic, she wondered what kind of new experiences she would have here. Before she had long to think about it, Ms. Spot came to the front of the class again and announced, “There is no Art Area today, so you can talk quietly, or read, whichever you prefer, just for today.” Then she walked back to her desk and began looking at a clump of papers.

Loki leaned over her desk and looked at the assortment of folders and notebooks there. “Need help organizing?” she offered.

“Yeah,” Saderia admitted. “I don’t really know what’s going on.”

“You’ll get used to it after a while,” she assured her, and quickly began to separate her folders and such into piles where she marked them with ‘Math’ or ‘Science’ or the other subjects with a black marker. She explained what she’d need for what classes and the basic layout of the school day. “Just make sure to bring what you need to each class because the teachers don’t like you going back. You can put these in your desk however you want,” she finished, pushing over to her the stacks of folders that were now labeled and organized.

“Thanks, Loki,” Saderia said, flashing her a grateful smile.

She shrugged. “No problem.” Grabbing something from her desk, she leaned back again and began reading her magazine. Saderia looked around, anxiously wondering what she should do until she remembered that

Ms. Spot had said they could talk to anybody. Loki obviously seemed content to just read, and Saderia could tell that, although she was being friendly, she liked to stay solitary. Even if she could become friends with her, they probably wouldn't hang out too much. Saderia could understand that.

But she hadn't brought a book with her and so she didn't know what she should do to pass the time. There was a bookshelf but she was contemplating talking to the lion, Dashenirus. Maybe she could find out what was wrong and ask him why he was so jumpy around her. It might be kind of uncomfortable at first, but she did want to talk to him and maybe even make friends. Despite his jumpiness, he seemed kind of nice, and, as said before, she trusted her intuition.

But thinking about talking to him and actually getting up the nerve to go over there were two entirely different things and she didn't know whether she was feeling brave enough to get over her shyness. Loki was the easiest animal to talk to so far, but around anyone else, she definitely felt shy and uneasy. She was about to force herself to get up and go over there when Loki, still keeping her eyes glued to the magazine, slipped her a piece of paper.

Saderia blinked and looked down at it. There was a picture of Lizzie's head on a frog's body with words that said 'Behind you.' Stifling her laughter, she sighed, turning around to see Lizzie, Lily and Lisa standing right behind her desk.

"Hi, Princess," Lizzie said brightly. She glared over at the cheetah who kept her face glued to the magazine. "Loki," she muttered flatly. "Cheepard."

"Ribbit," Loki replied, cracking a smile, but not moving her gaze from the magazine.

Lizzie looked back at Lily and Lisa in confusion, shaking her head like Loki was an idiot. The two girls just shrugged and Lizzie turned back to Saderia. "Anyway," she said, "you could come over to hang out with us instead of hanging around this antisocial loser all day."

"I prefer loner," Loki said flatly, still not looking at them.

Ignoring her, Lily said, "Well, Princess, what do you think?"

“Yeah, we could talk about all the cool things you must have,” Lizzie said. “I mean, you’re rich and you’re a Princess so you must get whatever you want.”

“Do you have a mall in your bedroom?” Lily added. “What’s your bedroom like?”

“What kinds of accessories do you have? Where do you get your fur done? What kinds of cool things do you like to do?” Lizzie echoed, getting excited. “How many friends do you have?”

“Just one so far,” Saderia replied to the last one, feeling the need to jump in. She cast a glance at Loki, and the cheetah smiled faintly, though she didn’t look up.

Lizzie frowned. “Her?”

“Why wouldn’t I be friends with her? She’s nice and she’s the only one so far who calls me by my name,” Saderia replied, narrowing her eyes.

“We call you by your name!”

“No you don’t. My name’s Saderia, not Princess. And stop judging me because of my title, would you?”

“What do you mean by that?” Lizzie asked, frowning.

“Well, for starters, I don’t want to talk about any of that stuff. No, I don’t have a mall in my room, and I actually hate accessories. My room’s blue since I like that color. And I might be rich and a Princess, but that doesn’t have to mean I get whatever I want. In fact, I’d prefer it if Mom and Dad didn’t give me everything I asked for. It might make me feel a little normal. Because of this, I try not to ask for too much. And as far as what kind of stuff I have and what I like to do, well, I like to read so I have a lot of books and I have a lot of sports stuff in my closet and things I took from outside. I like to play outside and have adventures. And I don’t get my fur done anywhere; I let it go the way it wants.”

All three of them looked aghast. “Don’t you like anything normal?” Lizzie asked. “I mean, you’re a Princess! Are you just kidding us?”

Saderia narrowed her eyes, getting mad. “I told you to stop judging me! Just because I’m a Princess doesn’t mean I’m all frilly and girly and helpless! I have a personality, you know.”

“You’re crazy! Why wouldn’t you like anything normal?”

“‘Normal?’ Who says what I like isn’t ‘normal?’ And I’m not crazy, I just have my own interests. If you’re looking for the stereotypical Princess, she’s not here.”

“Stereotypical?” Lily asked in confusion.

From her seat, Loki rolled her eyes. “Study your vocab, would you?”

“And while I’m on a roll,” Saderia continued, “why would I want to hang out with you after how cold you just were to that lion?”

“But he’s a freak!” Lizzie protested angrily.

“Well, I’m getting to be a freak by your standards now, aren’t I? I’m a Princess who can’t stand being girly and likes to get dirty and be wild and crazy and rough and doesn’t get *everything* she wants.”

Lizzie narrowed her eyes. “You *are* a freak. I mean, what is wrong with you?”

“I have a mind, that’s what’s wrong with me. And I’m kind of sensitive about being judged by my stupid Princess title, if you don’t mind.”

“Why? You could have the whole school bowing to you. The whole forest, even! You could get everything you wanted and be incredibly popular!”

“But I don’t want that,” Saderia replied. “All I want is to fit in and go to school and make friends. Friends that like me for me, not my title, may I add.”

“You’re so stupid,” Lizzie growled. “You have everything you could ever want, and yet you pass it up.”

“I’m just not the stuck-up, prissy type. Is that so wrong?”

“Amen, sister!” Loki exclaimed, holding up her paw.

“Keep out of this, crossbreed,” Lizzie hissed at her.

Loki just raised her eyebrows and didn’t reply.

“Why would I want to be friends with you when you just look down on everybody else?” Saderia asked them. “I don’t want the others to look up to me, I just want to be their friend and equal. If you’re going to be so cold

to anybody who's the least bit different than you, then I don't want to be a part of that."

"Again, I say, amen to that!" Loki agreed with the hint of her haughty grin twitching at the corners of her lips.

"We're out of here," Lizzie hissed. "Freaks."

"Freaks," Lily and Lisa echoed sycophantically, following her as she turned away and stomped back to her seat.

"I like your style, Saderia," Loki said, watching them leave with a satisfied grin. "We're going to get along well."

Saderia smiled back at her. "Cool. I'd like that." She hesitated. "Was I too harsh?"

"Saderia, you were just the right amount of harsh," Loki told her, amusement lighting up her green eyes.

Chapter Four

School

Reading and history class started several moments later, and Saderia paid close attention to try to get herself on the same level as the others. Loki was a big help, showing her what they were reading in the textbooks and giving her a basic rundown of what lesson they were covering for each subject. Saderia was a little frustrated that her confrontation with the L's, as Loki called them, had prevented her from trying to talk to the lion. But she was also kind of glad because the thought of doing just that made her suddenly tongue-tied.

During the class that Ms. Spot taught, she noticed that the leopard teacher called on her for almost every question. It was almost as if she was hoping she would get the wrong answer, and testing her at the same time. Luckily, Saderia paid close attention and already knew a bit of it so she got the answers correct. Ms. Spot narrowed her eyes every time but made no comment about it.

Saderia remembered Lolista's warning about how she would have to work extra hard to gain the respect of her teachers and the students. She closed her eyes briefly, stifling a sigh. Because of the Princess status she didn't want, the staff treated her so coldly. They must think of her as the Princess stereotype, as the L's did: the stuck-up, cocky, better-than-everybody Princess. They must think she didn't care much for learning and was making a mockery of it. It was hard not to get angry or annoyed, but she forced herself to understand their perspective and silently made a vow to keep trying to find a way to get them to see who she really was.

At the end of the class, Ms. Spot assigned everyone else homework and announced, "Princess Saderia, stay in class a bit longer, but the rest of you are dismissed from class."

Saderia's head whipped around as a noise caught her attention and she saw Dashenirus grab his stuff and race out of the room as fast as he

could, the moment the words were out of Ms. Spot's mouth. Everyone else took their time to gather their things and start out the door, some casting confused glances in his direction. Saderia frowned in confusion but shook herself; wondering would get her nowhere.

Besides, she didn't have time to think about it because, at that moment, Ms. Spot came over to Saderia's desk and narrowed her eyes at her. "As for you, Princess Saderia, I'm assigning you extra homework. To get you caught up," she added. "And I expect you to do it all."

Loki looked up from what she was reading and looked at what she had assigned Saderia for homework, then looked at Ms. Spot. "You really have an issue with her, don't you?" she asked, her voice betraying her humor.

Ms. Spot glared at her and was about to reply but Loki just leaned back and let out a laugh. Rolling her eyes with a grin, she exclaimed, "Man, just when I think school can't get any more interesting, what with the L's and Grath trying to act tough, a Princess walks in and shakes everything up. Oh, *man!*!"

"Loki, I don't know what you're talking about," Ms. Spot growled through gritted teeth. "I have nothing against the wonderful Princess Saderia."

Raising an eyebrow, Loki looked about to reply but Ms. Spot cut her off with a hiss, saying, "One more word and you won't have recess today."

"Whoa," Loki said, her eyes widening as she held her paws in front of her face. "You don't have to get so edgy! Jeez!"

The teacher sucked in a quiet breath and let it out slowly. "I'm sorry, Loki. But I have nothing against our new student," she said firmly, even though both Saderia and Loki knew it was a lie. The two exchanged a glance but Ms. Spot went on, "Just go on with your day. Loki, you're in charge of helping her around, remember?"

"Well, yeah, I haven't exactly forgotten." Loki grinned and began to gather her things as Ms. Spot turned and walked away. "Hey, rough start, huh?"

"I guess so," Saderia replied.

Still grinning, Loki closed her eyes and shrugged. “Aw, don’t worry about it. Things will smooth out eventually. Everybody has to act like a jerk at some point.”

“Yeah, you do it all the time,” Lizzie muttered, glaring at the cheetah as she passed by their desks, heading out of the room.

Loki stared after her, her sneer not wavering. “Well, what do you know? Ms. Pris actually got one in.”

Saderia cracked a smile but quickly changed it to a kind one and said, “You’re not a jerk.”

“Hey, you just met me so it’s not your place to judge,” she replied.

“And it’s Lizzie’s place instead?”

“Nope, it’s mine, and I’m proud to say that I do my fair share of being a jerk. But anyway, Lizzie got us off track.” Loki quickly checked her stuff and then told Saderia what to bring to her next class. “It’s math and science next,” she informed her. “Follow me.”

Saderia got up to follow the cheetah as she walked a little impatiently toward the door. Saderia guessed she was used to running extremely fast, being a cheetah, and the fact that she had to walk at the same pace as everyone at school was probably annoying.

“Ms. Zanah teaches math and science,” Loki explained as they walked out together. “Lunch and recess comes in the middle. Don’t worry; I’ll fill you in on what we’re doing.”

Saderia just nodded, thinking about what this next classroom would be like, as Loki led her across the little space between the two classrooms. She noticed that students on the other side of the hall were switching classes, too.

As she entered the next classroom beside her friendly guide, she took in the scene with a growing smile. It was almost the same as the other classroom with a big whiteboard at the front and a teacher’s desk off to the side. Desks were lined up as they were in her homeroom classroom to face the whiteboard and the students were beginning to fill the seats.

“Where do you want to sit?” Loki asked, scanning the room for two available desks.

“We get to pick?” Saderia questioned.

“Of course. We’re in school, not prison. You just got assigned a seat in homeroom since you’re a new student. We got to pick at the beginning of the school year.”

“Oh, okay.”

Loki grinned suddenly. “But I suspect that Ms. Spot will soon get annoyed with the seating arrangements and switch us. The L’s being the cause of that.”

Saderia smiled back at her and located two seats near the end of the second to last row. “We can sit there,” she pointed out.

“Works for me.”

As Loki led them over to the seats, Saderia couldn’t help but look around to see where Dashenirus had gone and noticed him sitting in one seat on the end of the last row, away from everyone else. He looked just as on edge as before, and he kept glancing around quickly, almost as if he was looking for something... She blinked. Was he really looking for her or was she just being paranoid?

She wondered if she should go over to ask why he was freaking out like that, but Loki had already pushed her down into one seat, while she took the end seat. Saderia continued to stare at the lion until his eyes found her and stared at her for a long moment, his expression unreadable. He seemed to have calmed down just a little bit, but not much; he still seemed uncomfortable and Saderia stared back at him, her face a question mark. Such glowing amber eyes...she found herself unable to stop staring, an uneasy feeling in her stomach.

His eyes narrowed, not like he was angry and more like he was upset, and then he closed them and turned away from her. He put his head down, staring miserably at the clock and watching the seconds tick away, probably hoping they would go faster.

“So you’re just as weirded out by him as the rest of us, huh?” Saderia jumped as Loki’s voice interrupted her thoughts and broke through her concentration. She turned away from Dashenirus and saw that the cheetah had followed her stare with a calm but confused expression.

Saderia's fur instantly began to bristle, although she didn't know why she was being so defensive.

"I don't think he's weird exactly," she said hotly. Only slightly calmer, she went on, "I'm just...confused. It's almost like he's avoiding me or freaked out by me or something." She stared at her almost-friend. "What did I do?"

Loki shrugged. "Who the heck knows? He's always been a little odd, so don't take it too personally."

Saderia narrowed her eyes. "Oh, so you're just like the rest of them, then?"

Loki raised an eyebrow. "Um, no. I never said being odd was a bad thing. I'm odd, aren't I? I never said there was anything wrong with him, just that he acts a little differently. Besides, the day I agreed with L, L and L would be the day Lizzie gave up fashion and embraced football."

Saderia sighed. "Sorry. It's just...I don't know why, but I just have this instinct that...it's hard to explain."

"What's to explain? You don't owe anything to me. You don't have to tell me."

Saderia looked at the cheetah and her nonchalant yet understanding expression. A smile tugged at her lips. "Thanks, Loki, for understanding."

"It's what I'm best at," she replied, starting to flip through her math notebook. She pointed to the board where three problems were written and explained, "We're supposed to do those. There are new questions every time we come in. Ms. Zanah goes over them later. They don't really count for anything. They're just used to see what we need to learn, or something like that."

"Got it. Thanks."

Loki just nodded and began scribbling in her notebook while Saderia took out the one Loki had helped her label and began to do the problems. They weren't hard, at least to her, but she noticed that Loki was struggling on one problem. Saderia didn't make it too obvious that she was looking and didn't try to offer any help, taking the cheetah's pride into

consideration. With a grin, Loki finally got it then sat back, starting to doodle pictures of basketballs and soccer balls over her notebook.

Saderia, having nothing else to do since she had left her book at home, began to doodle as well, not really thinking about what she was drawing. Absently, she let her paw scribble across the page as she looked around at all of her classmates. Suddenly the teacher got up and walked over to her, and Saderia tried to smile at the white tiger teacher, but she didn't smile back.

"Princess Saderia, I'm your math and science teacher, Ms. Zanah. I'm not going to put up with any nonsense from you, like your homeroom teacher, and I expect you to behave. You might be royalty, but when you're in my classroom, you're no different from anybody else."

Saderia swallowed hard and tasted salt. "I understand, Ms. Zanah."

The white tiger narrowed her eyes. "Good." She straightened up and faced the rest of the class. "I have to step out for a minute. Nobody move." She turned to Loki. "Loki, you will watch the class for me while I'm gone. Make sure nobody acts up, and if they do, tell me."

"No problem," the cheetah replied, still scribbling in her notebook.

The white tiger smiled at her and then stepped out of the classroom, closing the door behind her. The instant Ms. Zanah was out of earshot, Lizzie jumped up from her seat and glared at Loki, exclaiming, "There's no way I'm listening to a disgusting crossbreed!"

At the same time, Grath snarled at her, "You're not the boss of me, you stupid cheepard."

Loki just ignored their taunts, turning to a fresh page in her notebook and pretending to write down names. "Lizzie," she murmured as she faked writing. "Grath..."

Lizzie glared. "Don't you dare turn me in!"

Loki rolled her eyes. "I'm no tattletale, thank you. You're just easy to mess with."

Lizzie hissed at her. "You think you're so great, Loki!"

"Yeah," Lily and Lisa echoed her, glaring at Loki as well.

"Yes, I do," Loki agreed, grinning smugly at her.

Turning away from her bitterly, Lizzie muttered, “Stupid cheepard.”

Saderia was burning with curiosity, and felt bad about it, but she couldn’t help but turn to Loki and whisper, “Why do they keep calling you ‘cheepard?’”

Loki flicked her ears and stared back at her, unbothered. “Because I’m a half-breed, like they said. It’s their stupid, made-up word for a cheetah/leopard crossbreed, which is what I am.”

“Really?” Saderia couldn’t help but ask, hating herself for being so rude the second it left her mouth.

“Yeah, they never let it go, of course. Just because my Dad’s a cheetah and my Mom’s a leopard, therefore making me half-cheetah, half-leopard, just more cheetah, everybody thinks I’m a freak around here and they never let me forget it. They always insult me with stupid stuff like ‘cheepard.’”

Saderia winced sympathetically. “That’s just cold! What’s so wrong about being, um...?”

She shrugged. “Who knows, who cares?” Grinning suddenly, she added, “I kind of like being a freak, though, and it’s fun to see that drive them crazy.”

Saderia made herself smile back at her. “I guess that would be kind of interesting.”

“Oh, believe me, it is. And I like being special. I’m like a new breed: cheepard. That means I don’t have to have anything in common with the rest of these losers.”

Saderia was about to reply, feeling slightly less guilty about her curiosity and rudeness and liking Loki more and more, when Lizzie interrupted her.

“Princess, we can give you one more chance to come hang out with us,” she called. “That cheepard’s antisocial and mean, and we’d help you get used to school a lot better.”

“Yeah, the crossbreed’s horrible,” Lily agreed while Lisa just nodded.

“Can you say ‘desperate?’” Loki muttered to her notebook as she continued to scribble.

“No thanks,” Saderia called back at them. “I’d rather hang out with someone who doesn’t just like me because I’m royalty, and who doesn’t label me. Once again, I *have* a name, you know.”

She turned away from them before they could reply and heard Loki’s quiet laugh as she began to doodle in her notebook again. Lizzie was about to say something anyway, seemingly oblivious to Saderia’s attitude, but at that moment, Ms. Zanah walked back into the room. Lizzie closed her mouth immediately.

The white tiger turned to Loki. “Well, how were they?”

Loki smiled a big, obviously fake smile at the teacher. “Why, they were all just so sweet,” she replied.

Instantly suspicious, the teacher’s gaze rested on Lizzie, who tried to look innocent, and then on Grath who didn’t even bother to do that much. She let out a sigh, knowing she had no proof even if they had done something and just nodded to Loki. “Good, then we can begin.”

Ms. Zanah walked to the front of the classroom and addressed the entire class, “Has everyone finished with these problems?” There were nods and yeses and Saderia glanced down at her own notebook. But when she did, her eyes widened and she almost gasped out loud. It wasn’t the problems she was concerned about; it was the little picture she had scribbled, having nothing else to do. In shock, she stared at a tiny doodle of Dashenirus that she hadn’t even been aware of drawing. Had it been there before?

Beginning to feel very disquieted she wondered if her intuition was trying to tell her something in particular. She already knew she wanted to get to know the dark brown lion better, so was this just another reminder? Discreetly, she peeked at him out of the corner of her eye and noticed that he was looking at her, too, though not noticeably. His expression was miserable and afraid, and he seemed no better than back in their homeroom. Still curious about him, she made herself promise that she would try to talk to him at lunch or recess, although she doubted she could keep that promise to herself. As the day went on, neither of them seemed able to look away.

At 11:30, Ms. Zanah dismissed them from class to go to lunch and again, Dashenirus went racing out, eager to get out of the room...and maybe away from Saderia.

“That freak has major issues,” Lizzie whispered to Lily and Lisa as she and her group passed Saderia on their way out.

“Definitely,” Lisa agreed.

“He gets weirder every day,” Lily put in as the three walked out.

“Freaks,” Saderia muttered, looking to Loki for directions.

“One second,” she replied, getting her things together. When it was all organized and easy to carry, she stood up and led Saderia out of the room. “We go back to homeroom to get our lunches or lunch money,” she explained. “Did you bring yours or not?”

“I brought my lunch,” Saderia replied.

“Me too,” Loki said. “And that’s good because then we don’t have to worry about buying it.”

As they were about to walk into their homeroom, Dashenirus arrived at the door, carrying a paper bag, but he froze when he saw them. Then he looked about to bolt but Loki stepped challengingly in his way and narrowed her eyes at him. “Think you can outrun a cheetah?” she demanded.

He shrank away from her and for a moment his gaze flicked to Saderia’s face. He quickly turned away from her and looked down. “No,” he muttered. It was only the second time she’d heard his voice; it was soft and shy. “Why are you stopping me, Loki?” he asked.

“You tell me,” she replied. “What’s your problem today? You’re running from everybody like we all have some sort of disease.”

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I just...I...” He looked up at Saderia and then turned to Loki apologetically. “I really am sorry, but I...I have to go.”

He pushed past her, not roughly at all, and then began racing down the hall in the direction that all the other students were going. Loki’s eyebrows raised as both of them turned to watch him leave.

“What *is* his problem?” Loki said bluntly. She frowned. “Did I say something? I usually don’t mess with him but he should know by now that I don’t mean to be harsh.”

“I don’t think it was you,” Saderia replied.

“Well, what was it then?”

She hesitated, then murmured, “I think it was me.”

Loki turned to frown at her in confusion. “Why would he act like that because of you?”

She shrugged. “I have no idea, but I want to find out.”

“Well, good luck, because he’s as jumpy as a rabbit today. He always keeps to himself as much as possible but he’s being even...weirder—if I can use the word—now.”

Saderia nodded slowly, murmuring, “I wish I knew why he seems so upset. Does he seem that way to you?”

“Yeah, but he’s always been that way, even more so in the last couple of weeks.” Loki stepped away into the classroom, signaling for Saderia to follow and ending the conversation. Saderia followed her inside without another word and the two girls split up to go to their book bags and get their lunches, each carried in a paper sack. Then Loki led her out of the classroom and down the hall, neither of them saying a word.

The cheetah took a left when they reached the end of the hall, and they walked out the door at the end of that hall, which took them outside. Outside, there was a paved walkway that led to another building Saderia presumed was the cafeteria. Loki and Saderia followed the walkway at a casual pace and Saderia looked to her right to notice a separate path, this one not paved but trodden down, that led to a fenced-in area. The area was big and there was a large jungle gym and play tower for them to play on. There was a basketball hoop left of that and a huge area for running around, as well. Benches lined the entire area and a bag filled with balls sat near the gate.

“The playground,” Loki announced, following her gaze. “For recess, a.k.a. the best part of the school day. For me, at least.”

“Cool,” Saderia said, anticipating the fresh air and the fun of running around, so happy and free. She had never been anywhere like there, either, and so she was definitely looking forward to it. Looking at Loki and hearing what she said, she knew that the cheetah was eagerly waiting for it, too. She told Loki how she felt about being outside, about the freedom, and asked if she felt the same way.

“Definitely,” she replied. “I love that feeling.” She grinned. “And competition is my second favorite thing.”

“Well, I need a way to repay you for showing me around,” Saderia said, smiling back at her. “So I could help you with that.”

“You are so on!” Loki exclaimed, quickening her pace in excitement as she headed toward the lunch building.

“Just no races,” Saderia added, attempting to catch up with her.

“Deal.”

They slowed down and trotted into the lunch building, which was designed much like the school. When they stepped inside, food scents instantly greeted them along with the collective hum of many animals chatting. Many, many tables were lined up, from where she had come in, to where students were lining up to get their food from the kitchen.

“Where do we sit?” Saderia asked.

“We have two tables for our classes,” she told her. “This way.” She began walking down the line of tables and Saderia quickly followed her.

“Right here,” she announced a moment later, pointing out two tables that were already filled with classmates. Then she seemed uncomfortable, almost awkward, and Saderia frowned in confusion. “I can sit with you if you want,” Loki said hesitantly. “I usually eat by myself, but I mean, if you want someone to talk to or protect you from the L’s or something...” She trailed off, looking away awkwardly.

Saderia had already seen that Loki liked to keep to herself, a loner as she had put it, and could understand why she felt that way. She definitely didn’t want to make her almost-friend uncomfortable and she didn’t mind eating by herself either. If Loki could understand and accept her, then she

could easily return the favor. "It's fine," Saderia told her gently. "I don't mind if you want to eat alone."

"Uh...you sure?"

"Yeah, I understand."

Loki flashed her a grin, this time one that was relieved. "Thanks. The others usually think I'm weird since I like to be by myself sometimes."

"I don't. It's the least I can do to repay you for understanding me. I'm not prejudiced against anybody."

"Thanks," Loki replied, her voice sounding very much like she meant it. She glanced down at an empty spot on the end of the table then turned back to Saderia. "I'll come get you when lunch is over and we can have our competitions at recess."

"All right. See you then, Loki."

After the cheetah had run to the empty end of the table and sat down to eat, Saderia looked around for a place to sit. Feeling slightly intimidated, she silently pondered sitting in an empty space or just trying to blend in with the others. It was then that she noticed Dashenirus sitting alone at the other end of the table, nibbling on a berry from his lunch bag. She seemed to freeze for a moment. Could she actually get up the courage to go over there and try to talk to him, like she had wanted? Even if she did, would he even stick around long enough for a conversation? As Loki had so accurately put it, he seemed to be as jumpy as a rabbit.

She sucked in a breath of air then let it out. She should at least take a chance and try to find out more about him. She, of all animals, should know to follow her instincts that were leading her to him.

Hesitantly, she stepped toward him, feeling her face flush with shyness. What if he did talk to her? What would she say? Wasn't it rude to bother him anyway? She paused, but eventually her curiosity won out on her. Silently, she set down her lunch bag a little way away from him, then hesitated again, noticing that he kept his head turned away from everyone else. He obviously didn't know she was there.

"Hi," she murmured quietly.

She didn't know how he'd even heard her over the loud, collective noise of animals chatting all over the cafeteria, but the second he heard her voice, he jumped, knocking his lunch bag over and spilling its contents out all over the table. She stared at the few berries that had been inside, wondering why he didn't bring anything else to eat. What had Lizzie said? *He lives out in the woods.* Could that really be *true*?

She stopped thinking about it and looked back at the lion's expression. His amber eyes were wide with surprise and fear and every part of him tensed, as if he was getting ready to run. But he must have thought better of it, knowing there was no way he could pass off his sudden exit as being innocent, and so he stayed put but he still looked horrified and disbelieving. He blinked and tried to relax, though Saderia could see it wasn't easy.

"Hi...Saderia," he murmured back, still seeming afraid. His voice was soft and quiet, and Saderia could hear fear in it but also kindness. Then he froze. "I...I mean...you did say you wanted to be called Saderia, and not Princess Saderia in class...?" He trailed off, looking down in mortification.

Saderia blinked in surprise. "You heard that?"

"Yeah, wasn't I supposed to?"

"It just didn't seem like anybody else heard it," she babbled, her face burning uncomfortably. But through the embarrassment, she managed to smile hopefully. Maybe he didn't stereotype her like the rest of the class did, with the exception of Loki. "But, yes, that's what I want to be called."

"Okay." It was obvious he was looking for a way to escape; Saderia could feel the tension about him.

She was about to ask him why he was so jumpy around her, but suddenly lost her nerve and couldn't say it. Now she wanted a way out, too.

"Sorry," he said softly and suddenly. "I must seem like a freak to you."

"Not really," she replied, and that was true. She was definitely curious about him and the way he acted was definitely strange, but something about him had captured her attention and sympathy and she just want to get to know him.

“The others do,” he said, frowning.

“I’m not the others,” she pointed out.

For a second, he seemed to relax; he even looked a bit hopeful and a lot friendlier, but in almost the same instant, he was back on his guard. He turned away from her but she could see he was watching her out of the corner of his eyes. “Why are you talking to *me*? Why don’t you go sit with some of the others? They all seem eager to be your friend.”

“They don’t want to me my true friends; they just want to be my friends because I’m royalty.”

He said nothing and there was a long silence, then he sighed, although still wary, and turned to her with pleading eyes. “I know I’m being a jerk, but I...I just...like to be alone. Sorry.”

“That’s okay, I can understand that,” she said quickly. “Maybe... maybe we can talk later,” she suggested awkwardly. Despite the uncomfortable moment, her eyes couldn’t help but wander to the few berries that had spilled out of his lunch bag and again she wondered what kind of life he led. Were all those horrible things that Lizzie and her friends had said about him true?

Dashenirus followed her gaze and defensively stuffed the berries back into the bag, turning away from her. Saderia picked up her own lunch and walked away to go sit in an empty spot at the table, taking out her lunch and beginning to chew absently. She should have known she wouldn’t be left to eat in peace for too long, because the L’s quickly got up from their seats to sit by her.

Saderia sighed, and didn’t try to get up to leave. Why bother? “What do you want?” she muttered, picking at her food.

“What did you mean when you said you hated being judged by your Princess title?” Lisa asked curiously, and when Saderia looked at her, it seemed like she was actually trying to understand her better.

She was about to reply to her, glad that at least one of them was trying to get to know the real her, but Lizzie didn’t give her a chance. “Lisa, shut up!” she snapped. “That’s not why we’re here! We’re here to change her mind and give her one last chance.”

“Look L’s, this is my first day at school,” Saderia told them flatly. “All I want to do is fit in and be like everyone else. I don’t want any special treatment just because I’m a Princess. All I want to do is learn and make some *true* friends. I’d be happy to be friends with you guys if you could accept who I am, but you seem unable to do that, so sorry.”

“You are the one who can’t seem to accept who you are,” Lizzie shot back at her.

Saderia’s eyes widened then narrowed. “Are you *defining* me?” she hissed.

“You obviously can’t do it yourself!”

Saderia hissed furiously at her. “How many times do I have to tell you? I am who I am and *no one* defines me! Got it?”

“Whoa, what’s your problem?” Lily said. “You don’t have to be so cold.”

“Apparently I do to get it through your thick heads that I want you to stay away from me and stop judging me as just some typical stuck-up Princess!” Saderia snapped.

“Are you calling us stupid?” Lizzie growled, glaring at her.

“Yeah,” Saderia retorted. “The only thing I can’t figure out is whether you were born that way or if too much perfume destroyed your brain somehow.”

Both Lizzie and Lily looked angry and clearly offended, but Lisa couldn’t help but giggle a little. Lizzie turned to glare at her. “What are you laughing at?”

She instantly stopped and became more serious. “Nothing, Lizzie. Sorry.”

Saderia frowned at her. “Don’t let her control you.” Lisa said nothing and so Saderia went on to Lizzie, “That’s not what I want to be: one of your little followers. I have my own mind and I don’t like the same things you do. You’re going to have to accept that some animals are different from you, and that doesn’t make them freaks.”

“We’re leaving!” Lizzie said abruptly. “It’s your loss, Princess.”

“I’ll try to remember that,” she replied flatly as Lizzie and Lily stood up and stomped away, calling for Lisa over their shoulder.

Lisa hesitated for a minute, then quietly said, “It was cool how you stood up to them.” There was the ghost of a smile on her spotted face and Saderia smiled back at her.

“You could do the same thing, you know,” she pointed out.

Lisa’s smile faded and she glanced back in the direction that Lizzie and Lily had gone. “I don’t think so,” she muttered. She looked about to say something else but Lizzie’s call interrupted her.

“*Lisa!*”

“Coming, Lizzie,” she said quickly, giving Saderia one last friendly glance before darting after them.

Saderia sighed, wishing Lisa would learn that she didn’t have to stick with them to be popular, but she knew that probably wouldn’t happen any time soon. She was probably too afraid of being shunned and called a freak like everyone else if she stopped hanging around with them and being Lizzie’s little slave. Oh, well, she thought, deciding that once she had gotten more used to school, she could try to help Lisa break away from the other L’s.

As she continued eating by herself, ignoring the confused and curious glances her classmates were casting her, she thought about Dashenirus and peeked at him out of the corner of her eye. He was eating his lunch as nonchalantly as possible but she could easily see he was still on his guard, watching her out of the corner of his eye again. She blinked as she realized that a single tear stained his cheek and abruptly turned away. It wasn’t right to stare and make him feel even more uncomfortable and upset. She spent the rest of the lunch period trying once more to figure out what had made him react the way he had, and if there was any way she could help him.

That was the main thing she wanted to do. That was also the one thing she was looking forward to when she became Queen someday: being able to help as many animals as possible. She didn’t do it for her own benefit; she just liked to see things work out for others and to see the smile

on their face. Helping others always gave her a good feeling inside and it made her feel like she had a purpose in life.

But she couldn't think of any way to help Dashenirus since she couldn't get to know him when he was so edgy. She didn't even know how to get to know him without causing him more problems. All she wanted to do was help, but it was probably none of her business, and she really had no right to intrude on someone's life. What could she do anyway? Stifling a sigh, she continued to eat her lunch and cast a glance at the clock that was hanging on one wall, eating quickly when she saw that lunch was almost over.

Suddenly she heard a voice behind her say, "You sure told the L's," and she turned around to see Loki smiling at her. "They're over there pouting," Loki added, pointing with her tail. "Don't feel too bad; they always use crocodile tears to try to get their way."

Saderia sighed. "I feel bad for Lisa. She's just trying to be accepted."

"Aren't we all?" Loki agreed unhappily. "Well, except for me, of course."

"That's why you're a cool friend. You don't care what everyone else thinks," she replied. She paused. "How *do* you do that?"

"Well, apart from the Princess stereotype hang-up, you don't seem all that concerned about what everyone thinks of you. You just speak your mind."

Saderia blinked then smiled. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Thanks."

"No problem. Ms. Spot and Ms. Zanah are getting ready to end lunch and let us go to recess so I was just coming to get you."

Just then, Ms. Spot got up from where she was seated at a smaller table with a few other teachers, and Ms. Zanah arose with her. The two went to their class tables and began to call to the students that lunch was over and it was time for recess.

"That's our cue to go," Loki told her happily.

"We can just leave?"

“Sure, we know where we’re supposed to go. Now, follow me, we still have our competition, remember?” She grinned haughtily. “Or did you chicken out?”

“No way! Lead the way to the recess field!”

Loki nodded to Ms. Spot, who smiled at Loki, narrowed her eyes at Saderia, then briskly nodded back. Grinning and rolling her eyes, Loki bounded away toward the doors of the lunch building and Saderia quickly followed, trying to suppress a pang of sadness that she would still have to work to keep from being judged. But when she met Loki’s smiling face, she couldn’t help but grin back at her, and look happily forward to what else might happen, even if it were difficult.

“So, do the teachers just use their names with ‘Ms.’ in front of it?” Saderia asked as they stepped out of the building.

“The ‘Ms.’ part is a sign of respect, I guess,” Loki replied. “And most teachers do just use their normal names, but some teachers use what they wanted to be called or they nicknames or something like that. Like with Ms. Spot, everyone used to call her Spots when she was a kid because of her weird pattern so she just stuck with that.”

“Whoa, how do you know that about her?”

Loki grinned. “I live in the same neighborhood as her.”

Saderia’s eyes widened. “You do?”

“Sure, we’re both technically leopards even if she’s more leopard than me, and the leopards all stick together in one neighborhood. So if I seem like a teacher’s pet to you, well, that’s why.”

“Oh, okay...”

Loki looked forward as she raced ahead, a smile still plastered to her face. “Yeah, I hear some of the leopards still calling her that and I got the story, so that would be how I know.”

“That’s really cool.”

Loki nodded in agreement and her eyes lit up as she reached the gate and shot through it onto the playground. “What do you want to do first? Basketball? Soccer?” Her green eyes glittered. “Race?”

“No way,” Saderia exclaimed, her amber eyes gleaming playfully.

“Bring it on, then!” Loki replied, racing toward the bag of balls and grabbing a basketball. “Come on, I bet I can beat you!”

“We’ll see about that!” Saderia retorted, following her to the basketball hoop, though she felt slow in comparison to Loki’s cheetah speed, even if it was only half-cheetah speed.

The two of them shot the ball through the hoop several times, running around each other and calling out excitedly, but eventually Loki won and raced around the hoop at a speed that almost blurred her. Saderia, completely tired out and panting, smiled and hissed in mock frustration.

“You were amazing!” she exclaimed. “How do you do that?!”

“Practice,” Loki replied, slowing down and walking over to her triumphantly. “Skill. Two older brothers.”

“Got it,” Saderia laughed.

“You were pretty good too,” Loki replied, grinning back at her in that haughty but friendly way of hers. “Seriously, you were awesome. You’re the best competition I’ve had in a while!”

“Thanks!”

“Race?” Loki offered hopefully.

Saderia rolled her eyes. “Oh, fine, we’ll race, but it’s obvious you’ll beat me.”

“So? It’ll still be fun, right? How about this—I’ll give you a five second head start.”

“Fine. Where’s the starting line and finish line?”

“Let’s start from the hoop, then race around the whole playground and then the hoop can be our finish line, too.”

“Good idea,” Saderia agreed.

“On your mark, get set, go!” Loki exclaimed and Saderia shot off, pumping her paws against the dirt and trying to gain speed, knowing that even with a head start she had no chance of beating Loki, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t try. Almost instantly, however, a yellow and spotted shape raced past her and ahead of her, around the playground and, though Saderia tried to catch up, she could never match the cheetah’s speed. When

she finally reached the finish line, she was panting and Loki was waiting for her.

“Well, surprise, surprise. You win,” Saderia told her good-naturedly.

“Yeah, but you were pretty fast.” She laughed. “For a tiger.”

Saderia grinned, rolling her eyes and was about to reply when she spotted Dashenirus sitting alone on one of the benches. His sadness seemed to override her senses, along with the uncomfortable urge to go over to see if he wanted to play with them. But she knew the idea wouldn’t be welcomed so she sighed and didn’t try. Loki followed her gaze and gave her a knowing look. “You can’t save the world,” she told her.

Saderia was a little surprised at the kind wisdom in her voice then blinked gratefully but sadly at her. “I know, but I’d sure like to try.”

“Wouldn’t we all? Or at least nice ones, like you, and...well, I’m not exactly that nice, but you know what I mean.”

“Yeah...” She wanted to say more, but then the teachers called for them to get back into the building, signaling that recess was over.

“Everyone has their own path to follow and some aren’t pleasant,” Loki added, as she started to walk toward the door. “Now, come on. We have to get back.”

“Coming,” Saderia replied, casting one last glance at the lion before following her back to the door.

Remembering the way she had come, she didn’t have to pay close attention to where Loki went and padded back down the hallway to their classroom. She was glad that she was starting to get the hang of it, and that it might leave her more time to concentrate on other things...like that lion. What Loki had said was probably true, but Saderia just couldn’t ignore what her instincts were telling her.

“We can go to homeroom to put up our lunches,” Loki said, as she stepped toward the door to Ms. Spot’s room with Saderia right behind her. After they had returned their lunches to their book bags, they walked briskly to Ms. Zanah’s class and sat back down in their seats, waiting for class to begin again.

Loki began looking through her notes, having nothing better to do. “The tests are impossible,” she said. “There’s one coming up in a few weeks and by the way the teachers are treating you, I doubt you’ll be able to get out of it.”

“Great,” Saderia muttered sarcastically.

Loki just shrugged. “One F’s not going to ruin anything. You’ll get caught up soon, but I suggest you study every chance you get. It never hurts to at least *try*.”

“Okay, I’ll do that,” Saderia said, and gratefully looked over Loki’s notes when she passed the book to her.

A few minutes later, Ms. Zanah appeared in the doorway and walked to Saderia’s desk, then looked surprised when she saw that she was studying. She didn’t say anything then and instead walked to the front of the room to begin class while Saderia and Loki exchanged a glance and the cheetah grinned. Saderia noticed the L’s giving her poisonous glances from across the room but she ignored them and stopped looking. When she glanced over at Dashenirus, he wasn’t looking at her this time, although he still seemed as uncomfortable as usual. Now he was looking at the board where Ms. Zanah had written a bunch of science terms with a hopeless expression that spiked Saderia’s curiosity.

When class was over, Saderia was proud that she had actually understood some of it, and glad that Ms. Zanah had seen how hard she was working. As she followed Loki back to their homeroom class to pack up and get ready to go home, she glanced over at Dashenirus and saw him getting up slowly to leave, instead of rushing out like the other times. He kept his gaze glued to the floor and started walking to the door, but when he passed by Grath, he accidentally bumped into the panther.

Grath whirled around to glare at him furiously. “Watch it!” he growled, shoving him back hard. The lion winced since it obviously hurt and Saderia was about to run over there to help him, along with Loki, but Ms. Zanah swept over to them faster. “Grath, you are in serious trouble!” she growled. Turning away from him, she looked at the lion. “Dashenirus, are you okay?” she asked more softly.

“I’m fine,” he muttered. “It’s nothing. Don’t make a big deal out of it, please, Ms. Zanah.” Without another word he stepped toward the door more quickly this time, passing Saderia and Loki without so much as a glance. The two shared another look and Saderia asked, “Will he be okay?”

“I’d give him some space,” Loki replied coolly.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I know what I’m talking about.”

Saderia glanced back at Ms. Zanah, who was growling angrily at Grath, and hastily left the room beside her almost-friend. Neither of them said a word as they took the things they would need for homework out of their desk and then walked over to their book bags to pack and prepare to leave.

As Saderia grabbed her book bag and headed back to her desk where Loki was already sitting and reading a magazine, she tried to push the incident out of her mind, reminding herself that there was nothing she could do. Her intuition was telling her something entirely different, though, something she really wanted to listen to. But if she was going to do anything at all, she would have to do it one step at a time.

Putting it out of her mind, she instead turned to her almost-friend and smiled at her. “Thanks so much for showing me around, Loki. And for not judging me.”

“My pleasure, Saderia,” she replied.

Suddenly a voice crackled into the room over a small intercom in the ceiling and Saderia listened as Principal Delaca’s voice filled the room, reminding them of important appointments and announcements, ending with, “At this time, all animals are dismissed.”

“Time to go,” Loki said, getting up with her book bag. “Come on, I have to get home.”

“Right,” Saderia agreed, standing up with her.

“Bye, Ms. Spot,” Loki called when she reached the door. “See you soon!” The teacher grinned back at her before the two left the room. Saderia looked around for Dashenirus as she walked down the hallway with the swarm of excited animals, all talking and eager to get back to their homes.

She spotted him weaving through the animals as quickly as the mob would allow and soon she lost sight of him as she was swept along with the other animals.

Loki observed her wandering gaze. “Aw, cheer up,” she said, pushing her lightly. “Apart from the L’s and Grath, you had a pretty good day, didn’t you?”

She smiled, suddenly more optimistic. “Actually, I did.”

“See, there you go.”

By then, they were in the atrium, almost to the front door, and, a few moments later, they were met by fresh air and a more open space as the other students rushed out the door with them. Students crowded outside, running to their families or down the trail that led back to town. Loki’s gaze wandered away from her and her face lit up mischievously. “I see my brothers. Think you can find your family on your own?” She rolled her eyes at herself. “Well, of course you can. They’ll be the two tigers that everyone’s staring at.”

Saderia cracked a smile. “I’ll be fine, Loki. Thanks again.”

Loki waved the thanks away with her spotted tail. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Saderia,” she called as she raced at cheetah speed toward two leopards waiting by the trees who Saderia guessed must be her brothers. It was weird that they were leopards, but then Loki was half leopard, after all. She shrugged it off as she looked out through the sea of animals to find her parents.

She didn’t notice them at first but her eyes did stray to a dark brown shape racing through the crowd: Dashenirus. Her eyes widened as she watched him race away from the other students and rush into the surrounding woods as fast as he could go, disappearing behind the trees and bushes. Remembering again what Lizzie had said about him living in the woods, she wondered with a pang of utter surprise if it was true. And if it was, then *why* was he living out there? What had happened to him?

She sighed. He was gone and she couldn’t think about it anymore. Again pushing away her unease and discomfort, she scanned the crowded clearing for her parents.

It was no surprise to find that Loki was right when she saw her parents sitting in a little bubble of their own amidst the throng of animals, seemingly oblivious to the stares of animals all around them. Her fears leaving her, relief overwhelmed her at seeing them, and she felt better about her day. All in all, her first day had been an interesting one, Saderia concluded as she started toward them, smiling. She picked up the pace when they looked at her and smiled warmly. She couldn't wait to tell her parents everything.

Chapter Five

The Princess?!

The last thing he would have ever expected to happen was for the Princess of the entire forest to walk right into his classroom and announce that she would be going to school there. But, of course, that was what happened.

Dashenirus paced the clearing in the woods where he stayed, bitterly thinking over the horrible events of his day. He probably wouldn't have been as shocked if his father had come back to life! What was the Princess of the forest doing going to school in *his* classroom? He shook himself, slumping down on his grassy bed and gazing up at the sky hopelessly. It didn't even matter why she had come there; the only thing that mattered was *how in the world was he going to be able to go to school in the same classroom with Princess Saderia?!* How would he be able to deal with seeing her every single day, and wondering if she recognized him.

That's what he had been terrified of all day long. But he didn't think she would recognize him for *him*, since he was sure she hadn't seen him. No, he was much more afraid of her recognizing him for someone else. That would be the worst thing that could ever happen and he was terrified of it. His life was pretty bad already, but if Princess Saderia found out that...Well, his life would get ten times worse. And how could he possibly keep his secret from her when he saw her every day? Eventually she might start to see someone else looking out at her, instead of him.

He wanted to believe that he could just keep away from her and hide the secret from her forever, at least until the next school year, but that was a long time, and he doubted that she wouldn't find out eventually. It would be kind of hard for her not to know when he looked just like...he didn't let himself go there. Hopefully Saderia just thought of him as some shy freak and *not* some shy freak with a *secret*. But he couldn't just go through the whole school year worrying about it and hiding every time she came near. That probably just brought more attention to him, he realized angrily. But if

he didn't hide, then she might figure it out. All she really had to do was look at him!

It certainly wouldn't be too hard for her to put some things together. What if he let something slip out and the truth hit her? He groaned. All he wanted to do was get on with his life, maybe try to grow up to be a decent animal and not as cruel as his father, but the chances of that had been unlikely since the day he had been born.

Sighing, he couldn't stop from berating himself about how stupid he had been to think he could actually get through the school year. The way he had acted when the Princess had walked in had not been smart, but how else was he supposed to react? Like he was another one of the animals who were tripping over themselves to be friends with the royal Princess? Um...no... The initial shock had been nearly enough to make him run away and never come back and he still didn't know how he managed to stay put the whole day with the Princess in the same room, and *staring* at him, too!

He hadn't exactly reacted well, but it was better than running from the room and hiding forever. Well, maybe. He wasn't entirely sure about that, actually. The fear of her finding out his painful secret was agonizing and he was so terrified of being around her. Wouldn't it be easier to leave that behind? It seemed so welcoming to just get as far away from her as possible and go hide somewhere else to start his miserable life over, like he had when he had run away to the woods. But he couldn't do that and didn't want to do it.

As he laid with his paws over his face, trying to block out the images, he couldn't help but review all the horrible things that had happened that day. All the little things that would destroy him.

When Princess Saderia had walked in, his mind had instantly flashed back to everything in his past and that was painful enough. He had hidden his face, sure she would see him and figure it all out, thus ruining everything. The way he had acted had made all his classmates alienate him further, but he was used to that and more concerned with dealing with the fact that Princess Saderia was just a few feet away from him.

Before she had come in, he had been trying to get his life together, thinking about tests he wasn't prepared for and the hunger that would gnaw

at his belly all day. He had been trying in vain to find some way to make it all easier, when there was no possible way anything could ever be normal for him. He was just the shy freak who lived out in the woods because his Mom left him ten years ago and his Dad died. He had thought again about how much he hated his life and how badly he wanted to just give up, even though there was nowhere else to go.

But Ms. Spot's voice had jerked him out of his thoughts the instant the word Princess was out of her mouth. Ever since his father had died and he'd run away to live in the woods, he had jumped every time he heard something that resembled what he could remember of her voice, and every time he heard her name or the word 'Princess.' He had been terrified from the beginning of the Princess finding him and not knowing the one good thing he had done but instead putting all the bad things together. And if the King and Queen found him, well, he'd probably end up dead.

So he had jumped at the word Princess but he had expected it to be another false alarm. Then he had seen her. In that moment, he knew without a doubt that he was done for. With Saderia around, everything would get so much worse; he would have to spend every waking moment worrying about whether she knew or not.

She would find out about him and have everyone turn on him completely. He had no one on his side so he would be driven out of the forest to who-knew-where and might even die. The King and Queen would find him and there probably wouldn't be much left of him when they were done with him. His final attempt at normalcy, growing up to make something of himself and leave his father's horrible legacy behind would be destroyed. And even if that didn't happen today, it surely would someday. Until it happened, he'd have to spend every day fearing it, living in terror and anxiety.

All that had flashed through his mind the second he had seen Princess Saderia at the front of the class. He had felt hopeless and terrified and afterward he wondered if Saderia had seen all that since she had stared back at him. He hated himself even more for acting even stranger than he had already been made out to be. He hid his face in a desperate attempt to hide the truth from her.

Then Ms. Spot had made him tell her his name, and he had wanted to run away from there as fast as he could or die, whichever was easiest. If he told her his name, she might recognize it and know his secret. Even if she didn't, she would tell her parents, who would definitely recognize it. But there was no way to get out of it. He had muttered his name, knowing that even if he didn't, Saderia would probably find out eventually. Then he waited for chaos to break lose.

But nothing had happened. And that wasn't much relief because she could still go home and tell the King and Queen about him. It took a lot, but he somehow kept himself from bolting, though every part of him had been tense with terror.

But also anger. While he was hiding and not paying attention to Ms. Spot, but keeping his gaze focused on the Princess, he had wondered if he still felt sorry for her and liked her, or if he wanted revenge on her for what she had caused. Sure, it wasn't all her fault and *he* had definitely played a part in the horrible events from the past, but he hadn't known all this would result. He hadn't wanted anybody to die.

The whole class period, he had tortured himself with wondering if he should hate Princess Saderia and blame her for what *she* had done, or if he should let it go. He mostly blamed himself for what happened, but she had done her share in the past to cause him to wind up here in the woods. At least when his father had been alive he could just suffer with what his father did to him and get on with his life, but since he had died, he had to suffer out there and deal with the past haunting him constantly.

Because of that, he thought that maybe he should loathe Saderia, if not for what she'd done in the past, then for what she was probably going to do when she learned his secret. But for some reason he couldn't make himself resent her. There was just something about her that he liked and respected and he secretly knew she was right to do what she had done. She hadn't exactly known how bad things would end up for him. She probably hadn't even known he existed. Still, he wished he could hate her, especially when he was waiting for her to ruin his life.

After he had muttered his name, a horrible thing had happened. Saderia had had to pass him to get to the cubbies in the back, and her

weirdly fluffy tail had touched him, probably on accident. He had jumped at that slight touch, fear flooding through him to the tip of his dark brown tail, and he had looked right into her face. She had been so close and he literally had to grip his desk to keep himself from running away. He had seen the shock and surprise flashing in her face when she looked back at him, and for the rest of the day he wondered in horror whether she had looked like that because of how odd he was acting or because she had recognized him when she'd seen him up close.

He had scooted away from her and hid as quickly as possible, but for a moment he could only stare at her, wondering what thoughts were going through her mind. And the craziest thing was that he felt drawn to her somehow, as if he wanted to get to know her better and find out if she was all right after what had happened, now that he had the chance. But that was crazy because he shouldn't be anywhere near the Princess of the forest and he certainly shouldn't talk to her. He had turned away. Yet he couldn't help but peek at her, hiding behind his paws, and not just because he wanted to make sure she didn't come near him again, but because he was still wondering about her.

He had watched her from behind his paws the whole day. He was so curious about her for some reason he would never be able to explain. It was stupid, irrational, and it would probably result in his death, but he couldn't help it, even though he fought it. He had much bigger things to worry about then some irrational curiosity about the Princess.

When he forced it out of his mind and calmed down a bit, he had been furious that he had not heard anything about the Princess coming to school. It seemed like something to gossip about. Lizzie and her group seemed to know about it; Ms. Spot had said something about rumors, too, so why hadn't he at least overheard something about it? He could have prepared for it or had a chance to run away and never come back.

His thoughts were focused on Saderia throughout the class so he had been so relieved when Ms. Spot had dismissed them, just barely managing to force himself to go to the next room. But she and that cheetah/leopard Loki, who was apparently showing her around, had come in a moment later.

It seemed years before that class was over and it was time for lunch and he had rushed out of there, too, hoping to have some time to relax at the cafeteria. But he should have known he would never get that lucky.

By watching Saderia all day long, he had seen that she and that cheetah were becoming pretty good friends, and he actually had a moment where he was happy for her. He had felt a little better that, even if his life was in turmoil, Saderia's life was apparently okay, since she seemed happier. She'd also said something about her parents, which he took to mean that they were okay. And if she had a new friend in Loki, that was great because he knew Loki would like her for who she was instead of the fact that she was royalty. He had noticed that it bothered Saderia when animals treated her differently because of her Princess title. And, though Loki had kind of a prickly temper, she never bothered him like the others did and she would be a pretty cool friend. At least someone's life would be better once his was over.

Nonetheless, when he had run right into Loki and Saderia on the way to lunch, he had nearly melted onto the floor in horror. He had been prepared to run, unable to stop himself, but Loki had gotten in his way and he knew for a fact that he couldn't outrun a cheetah, even a half-cheetah. He didn't want to be rude or mean to them, even if Saderia was the source of his problems, but he couldn't stand to be anywhere around her at that point. Thankfully, Loki hadn't tried to catch him when he'd pushed past them, or else he'd be finished.

He was sure Saderia thought he was a freak. He wasn't sure whether or not he was glad about that or not. On one hand, if she thought he was a freak, that would just draw more attention to him and she would get suspicious. But on the other hand, maybe she would stay away from him.

He had retreated to the lunchroom, wishing he could apologize to Saderia or run, but neither of those options seemed very possible at that moment. It had taken every last bit of discipline he had not to flee into the woods when he passed them on his way to the cafeteria.

It was in the lunch room where the worse part of the day had happened. Saderia had actually come over to him, when he was off his guard and not looking for her, trying to relax, and spoke to him! He was

horrified, and he couldn't understand why Princess Saderia would waste her time talking to him, the freak of the whole school, when she had so many other adoring fans to deal with. Was she as curious about him as he was about her, or was it just bad luck that made her walk over to him?

Whatever the reason, the second he'd heard her voice, he jumped. It was loud in the lunchroom and Saderia's voice had been quiet, but at that point he would recognize it anywhere and, as said before, he had jumped every time he heard something close to it. When he saw her standing there, he felt like running or even attacking her, when the thought crossed his mind. But he didn't do either, and he managed to stay put although he was practically trembling with tension.

In the back of his mind, he knew he had to stop acting this way or he would die from stress, but trying to calm down with her standing right there was nearly impossible. Finally, he had managed to say hi back to her, but then he had realized he hadn't said Princess first. He had noticed that she didn't like to be called that and referred to as royalty, but he hadn't done it for that reason alone. In a way, he didn't think of her as royalty, at least not in the same way everyone else did. He felt like he knew her, even though he didn't at all, and that was why he had forgotten to say her title, but she seemed surprised. He quickly covered it up; he had heard what she had said at the beginning of class but she was still surprised, saying that no one else had. That was no surprise; she was royalty so the others would hardly care what she said—they would only care about being friends with royalty, and not with Saderia. They didn't care who she really was, but he was sad to see that she understood that too and it upset her. Why he was upset for her, he didn't know, especially since he wanted to hate her, but he couldn't control what he felt.

She could obviously sense his discomfort because he noticed she began to feel uncomfortable. He hated himself for making her feel so upset, though once again he had no answer as to why. He didn't want her to hate him for some reason, and he was sorry he was being such a jerk that day, so he told her that without thinking. Then—he suspected she was lying so as not to be rude—she said she didn't think he was a freak.

Then the worst part happened. He had actually let himself hope that someone understood him, forgetting that she was the Princess and about the

past for a moment, and letting himself think that maybe someone actually cared. She seemed kind and definitely brave and not like the kind of animal to judge. For a second, he actually wondered if she would be able to understand him. Maybe they could even be friends... But the instant that thought crossed his mind, the dream shattered and hard reality took over again. He realized how stupid he was being; that could never, *ever* happen and he knew it, but still, the pain of losing that little shred of hope was almost unbearable. He turned away from Saderia, not wanting her to see how hurt he was. He still didn't want to hurt her feelings, but he needed to be alone. So he told her to leave as nicely as he could, feeling horrible about it.

She had said she understood that and that maybe they could talk later—like that would ever happen—but again he felt a tiny glimmer of hope that he tried to forget. He couldn't help the hope that caught fire in him and he wanted to tell her that maybe they *could* talk again sometime. Then he saw her looking at the measly berries that had spilled out of the paper bag, his only lunch. The hope disappeared; he couldn't afford to let anyone, especially Princess Saderia, know anything about him and his life. Not only would that allow her to find out more about his past, but he would also prefer to not have anybody know anything about him. That way he couldn't hope, and it was easier in the long run.

He had bitterly stuffed the berries back into the paper bag and turned away from her after that but he couldn't help the pang of sadness he felt when she walked away from him to sit alone. He knew he had been mean but he couldn't afford to get close to the Princess.

Recess had come and he had sat down on one of the benches, not invited to take part in any of the games, as usual. He hardly cared about that anymore. The recess field was big and he could avoid Saderia there, and for that he was grateful. He kept his eyes on her, though; she was playing basketball with Loki, and was actually pretty good at it. But then, he had always known that Saderia wasn't the prissy Princess type. He already knew she was brave and courageous, but any other details about her he had yet to find out. He *wanted* to find out, but he *couldn't*. As if this situation didn't spell disaster in the first place, making *friends* with *Princess Saderia* would not be an intelligent decision.

The rest of the day wasn't any easier. He was still afraid but he had more or less come to terms with his impending doom, knowing there was nothing that could be done at that point. He had just sat through the math and science period and then left more slowly when it was time to go. All day he had wanted to leave school since Saderia was there, but now he wished that everyone, particularly Saderia, would never leave. If Saderia left, she would tell her parents about him, who would remember him.

But he couldn't escape the inevitable and had just walked away sadly. Well, he had run into Grath who had pushed him and it had definitely hurt, but he was used to Lizzie's taunts and Grath's bullying, so he had just shrugged it off and kept going, wishing the teacher, Ms. Zanah didn't have to make such a big deal out of it. He left then, swerving through the throng of students, wanting to get to the woods quickly, before the King and Queen saw him.

And then he had collapsed in the woods, wondering how he was ever going to be able to deal with going to school in the same classroom as Princess Saderia. He had the option to never go back but Saderia had definitely noticed him and she, along with everyone else, would find it odd that he just disappeared one day. They might even look for him. So that was out of the question, and there was also a part of him that didn't want to have to run away and hide again. He just wanted to be accepted and not have to worry about his past...but that was about as likely as his mother suddenly appearing out of nowhere.

He had been thinking about her, too, and wondering if she knew just how much pain he was suffering. Thinking about her made his claws start to unsheathe with anger since he knew she probably wouldn't care even if she did know. All he wanted was to have a family, and maybe even a friend... was that so horrible? Obviously it was, since he was never getting any of that *ever*.

Trying to tell himself he didn't care, he forced himself to think about the more important problem: what to do about Saderia. He could hide all the time, but that would take its toll on him after a while, and staring into a future of living in even more fear made him shiver hopelessly.

Part of him was already giving up, and wanted to just get on with his life and stop worrying about what would happen or what Princess Saderia would do to him. His life was already in ruins so it really couldn't get any worse. Something would probably happen—it always did—but he should just get on with life until it did. So what if Saderia was in the same class as him? So what if the past haunted him every day and she was one of the reasons why? So what if she might look at him one day and scream when it all came together?

He blinked, wondering if he could really live that way. Probably not, although the idea seemed more appealing every second. Maybe he could try to be friendly toward Princess Saderia, or at least stop jumping every time she came near him, therefore eliminating the suspicion...well, sort of. He could just deny his past, or at least try not to worry about it *all* the time.

...That seemed like a really good idea, but the chances of him actually sticking to it were slim to none.

He sighed. Why was life so complicated? Thinking again of Saderia, he wondered what kind of life she had now that *she* had *her* family. Yes, he was jealous, but he still couldn't make himself hate her. He wondered how much she thought about the past and how much it still haunted her.

He wondered why she was so sensitive about the others treating her like royalty. And what kind of animal she was... Or if she really could understand him better than anyone else, including his own father. But no, he couldn't get close to Saderia no matter what. It was just too dangerous.

Not that he wasn't already in danger. But if he actually let himself like Saderia, he would be torn between the past and the present, wondering whether he was right to be friends with her or if he should hate her guts. And then, if his secret was revealed after he and Saderia had gotten close, making her hate him, that would probably tear him apart. He couldn't bear to let himself hope and get that snatched away from him again.

The main things he had to force himself to keep in mind were that he couldn't become close to Saderia, he couldn't let her or anyone know anything about his life or his past, he couldn't live in fear, and he would have to find a way to deal with going to school with Princess Saderia when the past weighed so heavily on his mind. The last three seemed impossibly

hard. He knew he should probably think that the last three would be the most difficult to do.

But, surprisingly, and for some reason he couldn't understand, he was beginning to feel that the first one would be the hardest to stick to.

Chapter Six

A Start

Saderia sat at the dinner table with the rest of her family clustered around her, listening in as she described her first day to them. “I made a friend with a cheetah named Loki, because she didn’t judge me and we sort of like the same things,” she explained as the others ate their dinner. “But there were these other girls—Loki and I call them the L’s—and they always stereotype me. It gets on my nerves, but I made it pretty clear I’m not like them. Then there’s a bully but Loki deals with him pretty well and he doesn’t bother me *that* much.” She paused. “Then there’s this lion, and there’s something really weird about him. He seems kind of upset, and I’m trying to get up the courage to talk to him and see what’s wrong. I kind of want to be friends with him, too.”

“Sounds like you had a very interesting first day,” Karenisha told her, smiling warmly. “And I’m glad you’ve made an honest friend.”

“Almost-friend,” Saderia corrected her. “After all, I just met her today, even though she already seems to understand me the most.” Again, she hesitated and added, “I think that lion kind of understands me, too, but he’s just really shy. I talked to him a little bit and he didn’t call me Princess Saderia.” With a glance at her mother, she added, “Plus, there’s just something about him. It’s hard to explain, but it feels like my intuition is telling me something.”

Karenisha’s face lit up. “That’s great, Saderia. I’m sure you don’t need me to tell you to trust your intuition.”

“No, I know that,” she replied. “And that’s what I thought.” She frowned. “But I don’t really understand what my intuition is telling me, other than to try to get to know him. Usually it doesn’t just dictate my life this way.”

“Don’t you remember the prophecy?”

Saderia looked down as her father spoke, not wanting to bring up the prophecy that had foretold her ‘greatness.’ It just made her feel uncomfortable, and she always felt like she could never live up to such high expectations. What if she let everyone down? Wanting to get off the topic as soon as possible, she just muttered, “What about it?”

Makero flicked her lightly with his tail. “Don’t worry about the prophecy. I know you don’t believe it, but you’re a very special animal. But we know it makes you uncomfortable.” He leveled his warm gaze with hers and repeated part of the prophecy, “Her soul will guide her through her destined path, and will help lost souls find themselves again.”

Karenisha’s tail shot up as she realized what Makero was saying. “Your father’s right, Saderia. I don’t know what your intuition is trying to tell you, but this might be part of your prophecy.”

Saderia felt a cold lump form in her throat and her head shot up to look at her mother in alarm. “What!?” Not now! She had wanted to put off fulfilling the prophecy for as long as possible and she didn’t want to have to deal with it now. But then she had another thought. Frowning, she calmed down as she said, “Why now? I don’t think it’s part of the prophecy. I mean, maybe the lion is part of the prophecy—maybe that’s the feeling I’ve been getting about him. But I always expected that when I had to fulfill the prophecy it would be something, well, *bigger*.”

Karenisha shook her head and sighed. “You don’t understand, Saderia. I don’t know if this is part of the prophecy or not, but I’m just trying out ideas. And you don’t just fulfill the prophecy at one time, and it doesn’t have to be big.”

Saderia, Cia and Uncle Jash looked at her questioningly; apparently her aunt and uncle had thought the same thing as Saderia.

Karenisha met Saderia’s gaze alone as she explained, “This is a prophecy that you will be fulfilling all your life. And it doesn’t always refer to big things; it can be small, but important things.” Her eyes twinkled with amusement. “You’re stereotyping the prophecy if you think it’s going to be some big explosion-type thing. And here you *hate* being stereotyped.”

She had a point, but Saderia barely heard her except for the first part. “I’m going to have to keep fulfilling this prophecy *for my whole life!*”

she burst out, horrified. It was bad enough she had already thought that something big might be coming, but the thought that she would have to keep fulfilling something she was already terrified of *forever* filled her with dread. “That’s way too much responsibility!” she continued. “I can’t do that! I’ll fail!”

Cia and Uncle Jash exchanged a glance like they agreed with that, but said nothing. Makero rested his striped tail comfortingly on his daughter’s shoulders while Karenisha gave her a reassuring look. “When I became Queen, I was afraid, too,” she told her. “And I thought it would be too much responsibility, and it still is a lot of responsibility, but I’ve learned to accept that and do my best—the only thing anyone can do.”

“But that’s just becoming a Queen!” Saderia protested. Of course, she wanted Queen training so that one day she would become a Queen as great as her mother, but she was still afraid of taking on that much responsibility. Yet that paled in comparison to fulfilling a huge, ancient prophecy a hundred times over in her lifetime.

Karenisha let out a little laugh. “I suppose you’re right.” Her face grew serious but kind then. “But this prophecy is sort of the same way. You have to learn to accept it. I know you’re special and have *more* than what it takes to deal with this prophecy, but for some reason *you* don’t believe that.”

“I’ll fail—” Saderia started to say, but Karenisha cut her off.

“Failure is a part of life,” she told her quietly. “Not everyone succeeds all the time. Some failures and mistakes are harder than others. But you have to learn from them, and move on. I’m sure the prophecy doesn’t expect you to be perfect, but it does expect you to do all that you can.”

“Well, I will, of course, but I’m scared.”

“So are we all. But that’s what courage is: doing what you think is right, even when you’re afraid. It isn’t having no fear in the first place.”

Saderia blinked at her and there was a long, deep silence, but eventually Cia muttered, “I don’t know how you deal with all this weird, magic-y stuff, Karenisha. I will never understand any of this prophecy or Dream stuff at all.”

“I’m with Cia,” Uncle Jash agreed, looking confused and shocked.

“It took me a while to believe it and get it,” Makero admitted. “But now it makes perfect sense.”

Karenisha beamed. “I had a hard time, too, but I know about it now, and Saderia’s probably going to know even more. She is, after all, the daughter of the fiftieth generation.”

Saderia sighed. “I still can’t believe I’m supposed to be so special, but let’s get off this topic. I don’t even like to think about the prophecy. I just want to have a normal life.”

“I hate to break it to you, but you’ve been destined to have an *abnormal* life since you were born,” Uncle Jash told her.

Sighing again, she nodded. “That’s probably true.” She narrowed her eyes at all of them. “Can we get off the prophecy and my unfortunate lack of normalcy?”

Makero laughed. “Sure. Why don’t you tell us about what you learned today and what your teachers are like?”

“Well, Loki helped me get caught up with what everybody was learning and she showed me around the school.”

“That was nice,” Karenisha said, smiling. “I can already tell that you’re right about her not judging you.”

“Just a feeling?” Saderia asked, smiling. She didn’t mind talking about her intuition, even though that went into the prophecy a little. She loved her amazing instinct even though it puzzled her sometimes.

Karenisha smiled back. “Just a feeling,” she agreed.

Saderia was about to reply to the rest of Makero’s question, but then she stopped and the smile wilted off her face. She wondered if she should tell them that her teachers treated her differently because she was a Princess, and not in a beneficial way.

Karenisha must have picked up on her sudden change of mood, because she asked with a slight edge to her voice, “And your teachers? What are they like?”

“Um...teacher-y,” Saderia replied. “They’re pretty nice and I think I’ll learn a lot from them...”

“They treat you differently because you’re a Princess, don’t they?” Karenisha interrupted with a knowing look.

Looking down again, Saderia sighed, knowing she couldn’t hide anything from her mother. On top of the fact that Karenisha could tell how she was feeling and her intuition gave her an extra insight into her daughter’s world, Saderia didn’t want to hide anything from her parents. Not when she finally had them in her life. “They do,” she admitted reluctantly. “They treat me like I’m stuck-up or something. Like I don’t care about learning. I have to try to prove myself, I guess, but it’s sort of annoying.”

“Maybe we should talk to them,” Makero muttered, looking angry.

“No!” Saderia protested immediately. “If you do that, they might let up, but they’ll just think of me as a spoiled little Princess even more, because I squealed on them to the King and Queen.” She took a deep breath. “Just give me a chance to show them that I’m not like they think, and let me handle this by myself.”

“We will,” Karenisha said and Makero nodded even as Cia and Uncle Jash turned to them in surprise. Her mother continued, “We’ll let you handle this alone. It probably won’t be too hard for you to show them the real you, but you should do it in a respectful way.”

Saderia nodded, grateful that her mother and father understood. “I will. Thanks, Mom and Dad.” She knew they were trying to help her by not getting involved, and they were also preparing her for her Queenly duties. Apparently they were readying her for the prophecy, too. She would have to learn to handle things on her own, and she didn’t mind that. She actually appreciated the fact that her parents would make her work for things instead of just doing them for her, like everyone assumed they would.

Getting up once she had finished her food, she told them, “I should get to my room to start on my homework.”

“Did they give you a lot?” Makero asked.

“More than the other animals, but compared to what I used to do, it’s nothing,” she replied, giving Cia and Uncle Jash a forgiving glance when they looked guilty. Then she walked through the arch to the front room and down the hall to her bedroom where she had thrown her book bag

on the bed. Pulling out the things she had taken from school, she got to work on her somewhat easy homework until she had finally finished.

When she had put her books back into her bag, she thought about going into the house to be with her family. But instead she just laid there, thinking about the prophecy and what her parents had said about it. What if her instinct *was* pointing her in the lion's direction because he had something to do with the prophecy? The prophecy that would apparently last her whole life.

She sighed. She was a ten year old tiger princess, with parents who ruled the forest and a bunch of animals that thought they should bow to her, not to mention a huge, life-long prophecy hanging over her head. Could life get any harder?

But there were positive things about it, too, she decided. She loved her instinct, and the way it clued her in to things and steered her in the right direction. And some animals, like Loki and maybe even Dashenirus thought of her as a normal animal instead of Princess of the forest. And she was glad she finally *did* have parents. There was also the fact that, although she was terrified of having to fulfill the prophecy, it was also giving her the opportunity to help others.

But she thought back to the lion and wondered with interest if he really could be part of the prophecy that scared her so badly. It didn't seem very likely, but then, she wanted to help him and the prophecy wanted her to help others, so it could be possible. There was something besides wanting to help and make friends with him haunting her mind, but she couldn't quite figure out what. Maybe it would click in place if she got to know him. At that thought, she bravely put her mind to getting up the courage to talk to him later on.

The next day, she awoke to a peaceful morning and thought about her promise to herself to talk to the lion. She sighed, wondering why this was so difficult, before grabbing her already packed book bag and padding out of her room.

When she reached the dining room, her aunt and uncle were still eating breakfast, but Karenisha and Makero were up and walking around.

They smiled when they saw her come in. "Good morning, Saderia," Karenisha greeted her. "Ready for school?"

"Of course," she agreed.

"Do you think you can handle your stereotype situation?" Makero asked her more seriously.

"Definitely," she told him, feeling a bit more confident. "After all, if I can't even deal with that, how am I ever going to fulfill a prophecy?" For once it didn't give her shivers to say 'the prophecy' and she wondered why, but her mind was set on getting through the day and proving herself to the others.

Without another word, Karenisha and Makero started toward the door while Saderia quickly followed. Once the three of them had left the house, they followed the dirt path into town and then to the school. As they stood in the clearing in front of WildWorld Elementary, Karenisha looked about to say something to Saderia, but just then a voice cut her off.

"Hey, Saderia! Up for another competition?!"

The three tigers looked up the short flight of steps where a cheetah sat perched in front of the door. As soon as they saw her, Loki got to her paws and raced over to them at top cheetah speed, stopping in front of Saderia with her haughty/friendly half smile. Her green eyes shimmered in the morning light and she looked happy to see her.

"Hi, Loki," Saderia exclaimed excitedly.

"I take it this is the friend you've been telling us about," Karenisha said, smiling warmly at the cheetah.

Loki turned to face the Queen and Saderia almost expected her to curtsy, or gasp like the other animals would do, but she barely reacted to being so close to the Queen of the forest. Instead, Loki just grinned at her and said, "Hey, Queen Karenisha. Yeah, I'm Loki and I showed Saderia around. She's pretty cool," she added, flicking Saderia with her tail, a playful glint in her eyes. Saderia guessed that she only used her mother's full title out of respect, and grinned at Loki, glad that she didn't act so shocked. "It's good to meet you," Loki finished, staring up at the Queen.

Karenisha, although somewhat surprised at how casual Loki was being, smiled back at her kindly. “It’s good to meet you too, Loki. And thanks for helping Saderia out on her first day.”

“No problem,” Loki replied.

“You seem like a great friend for Saderia,” Makero added.

“Thanks, King Makero,” Loki replied. “I’m glad to hear it.”

Karenisha smiled, then turned to Saderia and said, “We have to go. We’ll see you after school.”

“Okay,” Saderia replied. “Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad.”

They said goodbye to their daughter and then began to pad back down the trail. Loki grinned at Saderia. “Cool parents.”

“Uh, thanks,” she replied, starting to walk toward the school beside Loki.

Loki looked about to say something but then she stopped and frowned, lashing her tail over the ground. “Oh, man! I just realized I forgot something back at home!” She gave Saderia an apologetic look. “Sorry, but I have to go for a minute. I’ll be back as quick as I can.”

“That’s okay, Loki,” Saderia replied. “I’ll wait.”

“Thanks.” Without another word, Loki sped off down the trail, leaving Saderia alone in the clearing in front of the school. Saderia sat back on her haunches, looking at the school as a few students walked up the short flight of stairs, beginning to think of ways that she could prove herself to her teachers.

Her thoughts were suddenly distracted by a rustling in the bushes a few feet away from her. Startled, she turned her head around just in time to see Dashenirus slip out of them. He carried a worn-out book bag over his shoulder and his amber eyes were dull, his eyelids drooping as if he hadn’t gotten enough sleep.

Saderia stood up, about to go over there and attempt to talk to him, but the second she moved, he looked up. He didn’t seem as alarmed or terrified as he had yesterday, just sad and even a little confused. But he still turned away from her quickly and started toward the school at a faster pace.

Saderia sat back, frowning, frustrated that she had chickened out and missed her chance. She watched him walk briskly up the stairs and push through one of the two doors, keeping his head down. Her eyes stayed focused on the spot where he had been, but suddenly her concentration was broken by a tiny gasp from behind her. She abruptly turned her gaze toward the sound, frowning when she saw that Lolista was standing a few paces away from her, staring at the place where Dashenirus had disappeared inside the school with wide eyes and an open mouth. She was actually paler with shock and maybe even horror. Why? Saderia's heart beat faster; could it really be because of Dashenirus?

“Lolista?” Saderia called, getting up to walk toward the bright lioness.

When she reached her, the lioness's gaze flicked to her and her ice blue eyes grew even wider as she took a step away from her, omitting a kind of choking sound. She looked completely stunned and maybe even a little afraid...but now she seemed angry.

“Lolista?” Saderia asked again, frowning in confusion at her strange reactions. “Is something wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost.”

Lolista's eyes narrowed but she shook herself a little and relaxed her face into a glare, working hard to hide the shock she had shown just a few moments ago. “Or something close enough to a ghost,” she muttered darkly under her breath, momentarily oblivious to Saderia's presence. Then she straightened up and narrowed her eyes at the tiger. “I'm fine,” she snapped.

“Okay...” Saderia murmured uncomfortably. “You just seemed so shocked about something and I wanted to make sure...”

“Well, it was nothing, and even if it was, it's none of your business,” she hissed angrily.

“Sorry,” Saderia replied, narrowing her amber eyes at her.

“Just get to your stupid little class, Princess.”

“Fine, excuse me for worrying about you!” Saderia whirled around, hissing bitterly as she started to stalk away from her.

But then Lolista's voice made her stop. “Princess, do you know who that lion was?” Her voice had lost its sharp, bitter edge, and now she

seemed truly curious, maybe even a bit cautious.

Saderia froze for a moment, reading the emotions in her voice, and then she turned around slowly. “Why do you want to know?” she asked, tipping her head to one side.

Instantly defensive, Lolista hissed, “I have my reasons, now are you going to tell me or not?”

Saderia narrowed her eyes and growled, “Fine, I’ll tell you, but only if you stop calling me Princess.”

“Oh, for...!” Lolista cut off and glared at the ground. “Fine, *Saderia*, we’ll play this stupid game. Now tell me who he is.” She snorted. “I feel like I’m talking to a two year old.”

Saderia glared at her. “The feeling’s mutual.” Ignoring Lolista’s glare, she sighed, guessing that Lolista probably wouldn’t keep her promise. But something else made her hesitate to tell her—her instinct maybe? Yet there was no real reason not to tell her, and Lolista was waiting for an answer. “His name’s Dashenirus.”

Saderia heard her sharp intake of breath but Lolista kept her face composed. “You know him then?” she asked.

Saderia nodded. “He’s in my class.”

This time Lolista did react. Her ice blue eyes grew large and her mouth opened slightly, like she wanted to say something but couldn’t. Then her eyes narrowed and an almost inaudible hiss erupted from her throat. “*Your...?*” She trailed off, lashing her tail back and forth, her face angry and stunned. Without another word, the lioness pushed past Saderia and stalked away from her.

Saderia stared after her, frowning, and raised an eyebrow. “She is so weird,” she murmured to herself. She shook her head to clear it then padded absently back to her spot to wait for Loki. Her cheetah friend zipped over to her seconds after she had sat back down.

“Sorry I took so long,” Loki told her, not even out of breath.

Saderia raised her other eyebrow. “You took about five minutes.”

Loki shrugged. “That’s too long for me, but oh well.” She smiled. “Ready for your second day?”

“You bet,” Saderia agreed enthusiastically, following her up the steps to the school, where she was greeted with a rush of cool air.

“Then come on, Ms. Spot is going to lose it if we’re late,” Loki told her, racing off down the hall at a slower run so that Saderia could keep pace with her. When they reached the classroom, Saderia walked toward the back to put her stuff up while Loki returned to her seat, having already gotten ready. Ms. Spot was temporarily out of the room so the class was noisy with the casual talking of students.

As Saderia passed by the lion’s desk where he was looking over some papers, she sucked in a quiet breath and managed to murmur, “Hi.”

His response was not immediate like yesterday, but he did look up at her. A quick flash of alarm in his amber eyes was a reminder of yesterday, but that quickly faded away to be replaced by weariness. And yet there was also curiosity. “Hi, Saderia,” he replied carefully.

“Um...what are you doing?” she asked casually.

“Just studying,” he muttered, looking back down at the jumbled up papers. “Not much else to do.” Seeing that she was about to say something he quickly muttered, “You should probably get ready for class. Ms. Spot’s going to come in any second and she...” He trailed off awkwardly.

“What?” Saderia pressed.

“Well...she and the other teachers are just...they’re kind of waiting for you to make a mistake that they can use against you. They’re already kind of...prejudiced against you since you’re a Princess. Sorry,” he added. “It’s just something I’ve noticed.”

Saderia let out a long breath. “I know. Thanks for the warning.”

He nodded but kept his head down and wouldn’t meet her gaze. Saderia walked away from him and toward her cubby where she took out what she needed and then headed to her desk.

“Just so you know,” Loki hissed to her when she was in her seat, “we might have Art Area today. That’s where we all go to another classroom to focus on an art or something like that. Monday we go to art class, Tuesday—today—we go to gym, my personal favorite. Then Wednesday we go to drama class, Thursday we go to music class, and

Friday we go to the library. We all line up and Ms. Spot takes us there so you won't have to worry about not knowing where to go either."

"Oh, okay," Saderia said, understanding. She blinked gratefully at her. "That sounds kind of cool."

"It is."

Ms. Spot walked in and they began the day, but then a little while later, Ms. Spot announced that they would be going to gym. The class lined up by the door, Saderia staying close to Loki, and Ms. Spot quickly led them out of the building and to another small building which opened up into a big space.

Saderia stepped into the gym with everyone else. Ms. Spot left when they were all seated on the floor and then a cheetah stepped in front of them, obviously the teacher there. Loki told Saderia that his name was Coach Secar, and he quickly explained that they would be playing dodge ball that day, and told everyone the rules. Then he glared at Saderia.

"And in case the new student, *Princess* Saderia is wondering, *no* she cannot sit out just because she's a Princess and doesn't like to play sports and do things like that." *Since she's so stuck-up*, were probably the words he'd like to add, but wasn't allowed to.

Saderia met his stare calmly. "I wasn't wondering, Coach Secar. And it's probably because I don't want to sit out; I like to play sports. Even though I'm a *Princess*."

Coach Secar's eyebrows jumped up, but then he frowned in confusion when he realized she was serious. He looked very taken aback, and muttered uneasily, "Oh, well, all right...Then let's begin."

"Can we—?"

"No, Lizzie," Coach Secar interrupted the lioness with a roll of his eyes. "If I wouldn't let the Princess sit out, then I certainly won't let *you* sit out."

Lizzie hissed in frustration and glared at him and then at Saderia. Saderia raised her paw.

"Yes, Princess?" Coach Secar asked, narrowing his eyes but seeming curious about her. "Do you have a question about the game?"

“No, I understand the rules, and it sounds like fun,” she replied. “But could you please just call me Saderia?” It seemed a little rude and she was uncertain about correcting a teacher, but that was one thing she wanted to get straight with everyone. She had a name and it wasn’t *Princess*. That was what Dastarius had called her.

Again, he looked surprised, but just said, “Um...okay, Saderia.” He blinked and then got back to what he was saying, dividing the animals up into two teams with Loki on one team and Saderia on the other.

“This ought to be interesting,” Loki teased her as she rushed past her to her side of the room.

“It should,” Saderia agreed, grinning as she walked to her side.

The Coach’s whistle blew and balls went flying across the gym as the other animals on each team were struck out. Eventually it got down to just Saderia and Loki, much to their amusement and delight, and Saderia was the first one brave enough to throw the ball to try to get Loki out. But the cheetah wasn’t afraid and she quickly leapt up and caught the ball, winning the game for herself and her team.

“All right!” she exclaimed.

Saderia hissed in mock frustration then went over to her and smiled. “Good game, Loki. You’re a really good athlete.”

“Hey, you did good yourself. It’s about time I got some competition around here,” Loki replied.

“See you on the recess field.” She and Loki walked over to the spot where all the animals who had gotten hit were waiting for the game to end, and took the only available seat, by the L’s. Lizzie and Lily glared and turned their backs on them but Lisa, who Saderia had sat next to, gave them a weak smile.

“That was really cool,” she whispered to Saderia. “I wish I could do that.”

Saderia raised her eyebrows but smiled at her. “Thanks. And you might be able to; I could teach you sometime, like at recess.”

“Well...”

“Lisa?” Lizzie interrupted. “Why are you talking to it?” She narrowed her eyes. “And what are you talking *about*?”

Saderia narrowed her eyes. “I’m not an *it*, Lizzie. And I already told you that I don’t want to be mean, but maybe you should try letting your ‘friends’ think for themselves every now and then.”

Lizzie said nothing and just turned away from her while Lisa sighed and scooted away. Saderia looked at Loki with a frustrated expression.

“Control freaks,” Loki told her, seeing her look. “Not much you can do about them, really.”

Saderia sighed. “Unfortunately.” She grinned faintly. “I’ll have to practice so I can be as good as you,” she changed the subject back to the game.

Loki laughed. “You’ll have to practice pretty hard,” she bragged.

Saderia laughed too and then her gaze drifted to Dashenirus, who was sitting away from the other students as far as he could get. He had been on Loki’s team and she hadn’t missed the flash of relief on his face when he wasn’t put with Saderia. He had gotten out pretty quickly, probably not from lack of wanting to play and more from the fact that Grath had apparently made it his goal to hit him with as much balls, as hard as possible throughout the game. The panther was leering at him now, but the lion ignored it, staring down at the floor. Saderia wanted to say something but decided against it and just looked away with an inward sigh.

It was then that she noticed Coach Secar looking at her with a shocked but appreciative expression. But before she had time to wonder about the look, Ms. Spot walked through the door and announced that it was time for them to go back to class. All the kids jumped up and rushed over to her, messily forming a line, but Loki stopped next to Coach Secar when he spoke to her.

“Good job today, Loki,” he praised her happily.

Loki beamed. “Thanks, Coach! I’ve been practicing with my brothers.”

“I bet you have been. See you next week.”

Loki waved goodbye and then walked over to the line that was forming. Saderia was about to follow her when she was stopped by Coach Secar's voice calling her name, her *real* name.

She turned around to see him smiling at her, though he seemed more than a little surprised. "You did very well today, too, Pri—Saderia," he corrected himself. "I was surprised."

Saderia just smiled, saying, "Thanks, Coach Secar." Then she walked toward her classmates and got in line beside Loki, who was raising her eyebrows at Grath's leer. The tiger Princess was just about to say something when she heard Ms. Spot quietly whisper to the Coach, "What kind of trouble did the Princess give you?"

Indignation flared inside her and she prepared herself to make an angry retort, but then she heard Coach Secar's hushed, "None. I was really surprised, but she was a really good athlete and a good sport."

Ms. Spot's eyes widened. "Really? How so?"

"Well, it was down to her and Loki and Loki won, of course. But she was very nice about it and she talked to Lisa, even though I got the feeling they don't get along too well."

Ms. Spot looked fairly surprised and Saderia couldn't help but feel a tingle of satisfaction at that. "That's um...interesting," the teacher finally murmured. She cast a glance at Saderia who tried to pretend like she hadn't heard anything, and then the leopard turned to the students and signaled for them to get back to class.

"Hey, did you see Ms. Spot?" Loki asked, concealed laughter making her green eyes glimmer.

"When she was talking to Coach Secar?"

"Yeah, about you," she said bluntly.

Saderia grinned. "Yeah, I saw her."

"She looked like she had just heard that Grath had turned nice!" Loki exclaimed. Her gaze became more warm and understanding. "But I guess a Princess being like, well, like *you* would be just as shocking."

Saderia shrugged. "At least they're starting to get it."

Loki nodded in agreement and followed her back to class, where Saderia went through the motions of the day, looking out for Dashenirus all the time. The lion still seemed sad and a little scared but not as jumpy as the day before. Yet he still seemed to avoid her. Saderia wondered if she could get up the nerve to talk to him again, but she doubted it, feeling extremely shy, and just stuck by Loki.

“I think the teachers are starting to see the real me,” Saderia reported over dinner on Wednesday night. That day had been just like the first two, and she had already begun to get into the rhythm of the school day, catching up on her learning with Loki’s help and understanding most of the topics without too many problems.

The only thing different about the day was the Art Area that seemed to change. That day, Saderia had followed Loki and the rest of the class far down the hall, stopping at a door on the right side. Inside that room had been a huge carpet where they’d sat. There had been cubbies in the back stuffed with random props for plays and things like that and a big whiteboard where there was a schedule for the different grades; it had been the drama classroom.

The teacher, a jaguar named Ms. Thetican, had put them all into groups to brainstorm ideas for doing a play and setting up a skit. Saderia guessed that she wasn’t particularly liked by the teacher, but the jaguar overall ignored her except to scowl at her sometimes, and make it known in no uncertain terms that she would make sure Saderia got no special treatment. That was okay with her, and she had worked hard like she had in every class to prove she should be judged on her actions, not her title.

The rest of the day had gone smoothly and she had hung around Loki, but also given the cheetah some space since she knew that she preferred to be by herself. Saderia also glanced at Dashenirus sometimes to find him looking back at her, and then quickly turning away. It was weird, because it was all becoming a habit for Saderia so quickly, and she felt like she had known her classmates for a lifetime rather than a few days.

Her instinct directed her toward Dashenirus, but she couldn’t get up the nerve to talk to him, telling herself that she’d have plenty of time to do

it later. However, her intuition was apparently a lot more impatient than she was, and it persisted, leaving her to wonder how she could ever make herself talk to him and find out what was wrong. Even when she did talk to him, it might take a while for him to confide in her what was wrong, she reasoned.

She had told her family of her instinct about him the first night, but she could never fully explain how it persisted throughout the day. Especially since she was afraid they might bring up the prophecy again.

“That’s good,” Karenisha praised her, referring to how the teachers were treating her and drawing her back into the conversation. “Keep working at it, and I’m sure you’ll be accepted in no time.”

“It’s good to hear you’re adjusting well,” Makero added, smiling at his daughter.

“It is impressive,” Cia admitted.

“And you’ve already made some friends,” Uncle Jash put in.

“We’re proud of you,” Karenisha summed it up.

Saderia beamed, the words filling her with a warm, happy feeling. “Thanks so much.”

Suddenly a playful glint came to Karenisha’s amber eyes. “Ready for a fun break?” she asked.

“Huh?” Saderia tipped her head to one side.

“You’ve been concentrating so hard on fitting in and making friends. I think it’s time you relaxed a little.”

She smiled, understanding. “What do you want to do, Mom?”

Her mother seemed to think for a moment. “We could have a race,” she said, at the same time that Saderia said, “We could have a tree-climbing contest.”

“All right, we’ll go with your idea,” Karenisha told her, smiling. “Makero, you’ll be the judge. Whoever gets to the top of the tree the fastest wins!”

Makero laughed and followed the two tigers out of the house and over to one of the sturdy trees in their yard. The King watched as they both

decided on a branch to climb to, then leapt onto the tree, hooking their claws in the bark. Saderia won, and they came back down to spend the rest of the day with fun contests and races that, to Saderia's relief, took her mind off the prophecy, and the task of eliminating prejudice.

When it grew dark and Saderia went to her room to read before she fell asleep, she noticed her mother's diary in her bedside table drawer, and carefully took it out. Karenisha had given it to her after Saderia had rescued her from Dastarius's dungeon. She decided that she might as well use it and get some of her thoughts out on paper. As she began to write about her first few days at school—about Loki, Dashenirus, the L's, Grath, the teachers, etc.—she noticed it felt good to write about it and decided to make it a habit, something she would do every night.

Suddenly there was a knock on her door and, with a smile, Saderia called, "Come in."

Karenisha and Makero stepped into the room and went over to sit beside her on her bed, both of them smiling warmly at her.

"What are you doing?" Karenisha asked, looking over at the book she was putting away. Her face lit up when she recognized it. "My...! Er... your diary," she said happily.

Saderia grinned. "Yeah, I decided it would be cool to write in it as often as I can."

"Good idea," Karenisha agreed.

"We just came to say goodnight," Makero added. "And that we're proud of you for all that you've done."

"Thanks, Dad. Goodnight, guys."

They left after saying goodnight and Saderia curled up under her blanket, falling asleep within minutes. But the instant her eyes closed, dreams slashed through her subconscious like the sharpest claws.

The daughter of the fiftieth generation of the royal family will be gifted with the Power of Dreams stronger than any member of the royal family before her. She will be expected to handle her Power responsibly and wisely, and do what she believes is best.

Part of the tremendous prophecy rang in her ears and suddenly an image of the horrible dungeon she and her family had been trapped in flashed rapidly through her mind. It was pitch black in the dungeon and she could just barely make out the sleeping forms of herself and her family; an image from the past. But suddenly a pair of bright amber eyes flashed through the gloom, big and bright, before fading with the rest of the image and leaving her staring into nothing but blackness.

Unexpectedly, Saderia began to feel tired and sharp pains stabbed at her from all sides. The flash of a claw, a furious screech, glowing words unfolding on an old piece of paper...then suddenly it was all shattered by a threat that now sunk into her mind with the weight of dread.

Don't think you've won, Princess! This isn't over...

With a gasp, Saderia's eyes blinked open and she sat bolt upright, trying to calm herself enough to think about what she had just seen. It must have been one of her realistic Dreams that...predicted the future. The power to see the future in Dreams was passed down in her royal family and, according to the prophecy, Saderia was the one who was supposed to have the power much stronger than any before her. She was the daughter of the fiftieth generation.

So...she had seen the future... Blinking, Saderia took a few deep breaths, trying to shake off the premonition of trouble creeping icily through her body. What exactly *had* she seen?

She suddenly realized that, if she were a part of the prophecy and going to have to deal with this sort of thing her whole life, as Karenisha had said, then she would have to get used to figuring these things out. But she really didn't have a clue what it could possibly mean; her head ached with confusion just trying to think about it. It would sure help to have someone to help her think through those Dreams with her...But she didn't want to bother her mother with her problems, and she didn't want to upset her with her Dream since it had flashes of the dungeon Dastarius had kept them in. And besides that, she just didn't feel comfortable talking about her Dreams with her, though she couldn't figure out why. It would be better for her, she realized, to talk to someone else that could take an outside view, but she couldn't since the Dreams were a huge family secret.

Knowing she had to figure this out on her own, Saderia decided to try an easier way of looking at it: taking it apart and looking at each individual piece to see what it meant. It had helped her tackle worse problems, after all.

The first part about the prophecy was probably just reminding her of her ability, and telling her to trust her instinct and do what she thought was right. But the rest of it... She had seen herself back in the dungeon, so maybe it was telling her that something bad from the past was...what? She had no idea, and moved on to the next part. Maybe seeing herself there was just a scenario or something.

She shivered as she thought again of the amber eyes in the blackness, knowing they must belong to Dastarius, although she couldn't remember the emotion shown in them. Thinking about him still scared her and reminded her of how close she had come to dying and losing the forest as well as her whole family to that evil lion. But Dastarius was dead, so how could he have anything to do with the future?

Moving on with the hope that she would understand more later, she knew without a doubt that the pain, the claws, the screech and the glowing words had all been from when she and Dastarius had fought over the scroll in Queen Tarae's tomb. She had just barely come out of the fight alive, saved by her father, who had killed Dastarius. The glowing words were the ones written on the scroll, first the words to give an animal the Power of Dreams, and then the prophecy which would haunt her all her life.

But the last part...

She shivered. Those were Dastarius's last, dying words, before Makero killed him. Terror made it suddenly difficult to swallow. Why would she hear those words again in her Dream? Would the past... somehow...come back to haunt the present? No, Dastarius was *dead*, so it *was* over. The dead couldn't come back to life...but she knew only too well that the past didn't just disappear. It could come back to the present at any moment. But no matter what she still thought about that time, it was still *over* as far as Dastarius being gone, and she *had* won.

Sighing, she wondered if maybe it was just as well she forgot the Dream. Then she could just get on with her life *without* the threat of

confusing and scary prophecies and Dreams that brought up the past when they were supposed to show the future. But in the back of her mind, she knew she wouldn't be able to ignore it for long.

Padding out of the room, she joined her family at the breakfast table and sat down in her normal spot, quiet and deep in thought.

“Something wrong, Saderia?” Karenisha asked her with a concerned expression.

She sighed; she should have known she wouldn't have been able to hide anything from her mother. “I had a Dream last night,” she confessed.

Cia looked over at her sympathetically. “A nightmare?”

Karenisha and Makero exchanged a glance, knowing it was more of a big deal than that, whereas Cia and Uncle Jash believed it was just an ordinary nightmare.

“Um...Cia,” Uncle Jash said, catching their look. “Maybe it's not just any nightmare.”

Cia blinked and then swallowed hard, realizing what he meant.

“What was it about?” Karenisha asked her gently.

Saderia shook her head. “I have no idea. It was weird and I couldn't make much sense of it.” She sighed. “Can you just wait a while for me to maybe get another one or figure some things out? It's too confusing now.”

Makero hesitated. “If you think that's what's best,” he told her softly.

Karenisha nodded in agreement after a longer pause.

“Then can we just forget about it for now?” Saderia pleaded.

“If you want,” Karenisha said.

“Good.” She got up, having quickly finished her breakfast. “I should get to school.” Where she could maybe forget about her Dream and focus on other things.

Karenisha and Makero left shortly after dropping her off at school, and she padded through the doors and down the hall to her classroom like she'd been doing it all her life. She didn't see Loki anywhere, but that was

okay, she decided, as she pushed open the door to her classroom. Loki was already sitting at her desk but she waved to Saderia when she came in; Saderia smiled back. She did notice that Dashenirus wasn't there yet and wondered about that, since school was about to begin.

At that moment, she heard a quiet little gasp from behind her and turned around to see Dashenirus standing right behind her with his book bag slung over one shoulder. The moment she looked at him, he quickly put his head down, unable to meet her gaze.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, as he slid past her into the room.

She watched as he walked down the aisle but then Grath rushed over from the other side of the room and stomped a paw on one end of his book bag, attempting to hold him back. The lion was stopped with a little start of surprise but the book bag was apparently old and faded and it ripped, spilling a bunch of books and papers onto the floor. Grath looked surprised but also cruelly delighted.

“Grath!” Ms. Spot exclaimed, getting up from her desk to storm over to him.

“It’s okay,” Dashenirus muttered, grabbing the things that had spilled out and rushing to his desk to hide.

“Detention for a week,” Ms. Spot sighed, stalking away from the panther as if she thought it wouldn’t do much good; it probably wouldn’t.

Grath curled his lip and walked to his seat while Saderia uneasily paced to the back of the room to get what she needed for class and put her book bag up. When she got to her own seat, Loki was hissing softly at Grath, who was sitting behind her.

“You jerk,” she snapped. “Why not try getting a life instead of trying to ruin others’?”

Grath snarled at her. “He deserved it. He’s a freak. Now get off my back, Loki, before I make you pay.”

“Like you could,” she muttered, turning away from him.

Saderia glared at Grath then, and growled, “Stay away from him, or I’ll make you pay!”

He snorted. “A threat from a prissy Princess. That’s terrifying.”

“I’ll show you terrifying; just give me a reason,” she snapped back at him, turning away from him as anger made her claws instinctively unsheathe.

Ms. Spot gave Grath a bitter look before she began class, and the ordeal was forgotten. After that, they went to their Art Area, one Saderia hadn’t been to before: music class.

The room was a backward-L-shape with a rug on one end. There was a CD player sitting on a shelf while posters with unfamiliar music terms decorated the walls. There was a whiteboard covered in grade level schedules, and there were a few small percussion instruments lined up before it. A teacher’s desk was at the back of it, covered with photos and music.

The teacher was a lynx called Ms. Melody—Loki told Saderia that was actually her real name—and Saderia liked her already. She began by passing out music sheets to the whole class and telling them to sing the notes. She stopped by Saderia when she gave her a piece of music.

“Saderia,” she greeted her kindly. “Our newest student.”

Saderia instantly perked up, seeing that this teacher wasn’t judging her as a Princess but as an average student; she hadn’t even used her full title.

She continued, “You’ve never done anything like this, have you?”

Saderia shook her head, and Ms. Melody bent down and began showing her a few of the notes and how to sing them. She got the gist of it and felt she would be able to follow along so she nodded when asked if she understood.

They sang the music, and at the end Ms. Melody came up to her to say, “You have a beautiful voice, Saderia.”

“Uh...thank you,” she replied awkwardly.

Ms. Melody just smiled at her and Saderia left the room with the rest of her class when Ms. Spot came to retrieve them, feeling a warm, happy glow all the way back to the classroom.

She was still feeling happy as she walked out of math and science class back to homeroom to get ready for lunch. Loki met her there and went to get her lunch with her, then raced ahead, saying she was starving. Saderia knew that she was probably just being nice in not telling Saderia that she just wanted to be by herself. She had already guessed that she and Loki would start to separate now that she was getting more used to the school. They would probably still be friends, but Loki preferred solitude. That was all right with Saderia, and she reminded herself to mention it to Loki the next time she saw her.

Saderia was the last one to walk out of the room with her lunch, not minding taking her time, so the hallways were empty around her. She didn't mind the quiet and the absence of others, because it gave her time to think, and she wanted to know what that Dream was about. As she continued to pad down the hallway absently, she tried out several different ideas in her mind about what it could be about but they all led to dead ends. There just wasn't enough information.

She was so deep in thought that, as she walked out of the building and down the quiet path to the lunch room, she almost didn't hear the voices coming from the woods. Once she did, she stopped dead, her intuition screaming at her, and listened to figure out what was going on.

“You’re going to get what you deserve, freak. I hope this hurts.” Grath’s voice. There was a long pause and then Grath snarled, “Well, aren’t you scared? I’m about to beat you up.”

There was a sigh and then every hair on Saderia’s back stood on end as she recognized Dashenirus’s quiet voice. “Can we just get this over with, Grath?”

There was a frustrated hiss and then the sound of a sharp hiss of pain from Dashenirus, but he said nothing.

“Aren’t you scared?” Grath’s voice taunted, but there was no reply except for another yelp of pain a few minutes later.

At that moment, Saderia dropped her lunch, knowing Dashenirus was in trouble, and raced through the trees in the direction of the voices. After just a short minute that seemed like a lifetime, she burst out of a thick bush and into a tiny clearing where she found them. Grath had Dashenirus

pinned up against the tree, claws unsheathed, and the side of the lion's face was bleeding, his eyes dull. The lion looked up at her as she leapt through the brush and she expected to see the same alarm, or maybe hope this time, in his eyes, but they remained dull and sad. He just looked back down again without a word.

Grath, on the other hand, was glaring at her and whirled around to face her. "What are you doing here?" he growled.

Saderia knew instantly that he had already hurt Dashenirus and would probably do worse. It was at that realization that a rage she had known only once surged throughout her, making a feral snarl erupt from her throat. She took a threatening pace toward the panther. "Leave him alone and get out of here, you stupid psycho! Leave him alone, or you'll regret it!" she spat in a voice she barely recognized. It was way too angry, hateful and willing to fight to belong to her, wasn't it? But her intuition told her to go with it, and she didn't give it another thought, focused only on getting Grath as far away from Dashenirus as she could.

Grath curled his lip and sneered at her. "Why should I be scared of a puny little Princess?"

"Because I've taken on much worse than you!" she shouted, her orange and black-striped fur puffed out with fury. "Get out of here!"

He glared at her. "Why would you care about this loser? He's weird and he deserves this."

"I just do, and no he doesn't! I'll give you to the count of three to step away from him and get out of here before I rip you to shreds! You think I'm afraid to fight you? Ha! Think again!"

Surprise flashed on Grath's face along with a tiny trickle of fear, but he held his ground and growled at her. "If you think you're so tough, Princess, then what are you waiting for?"

"What're you waiting for?" she retorted. "If you think I'm so puny and stupid, what's holding you back?"

For a moment, Grath just stood there, uncertain, then glared at her. "Stupid Princess," he hissed, before tearing the grass with his claws and then lunging at her.

Saderia quickly swerved to the side and whirled around too quickly for him to possibly keep up. She flashed her claws across his face as gently but forcefully as possible. Grath let out a shriek of surprise and pain. He raced to the side to try to jump onto her back but she was already a step ahead of him. She slid to the side right along with him, only faster and more agilely, and easily ducked down to dodge one of the badly aimed blows he threw at her. She used the movement to press her paws against his legs, throwing them out from underneath him. Grath fell to the ground and Saderia sheathed her claws before placing them firmly and roughly on his shoulders.

“Think you’re tough now?” she hissed. “Get out of here.”

Grath stared up at her with wide eyes then raced away from her as fast as he could once she let him up, disappearing behind a clump of brush. Saderia stared after him, her amber eyes slits, and then abruptly whirled around to see Dashenirus staring at her with wide eyes.

“That was...!” He blinked, unable to say anything. Then he swallowed hard and quickly looked down, saying, “Thanks for...well, saving me.” She noticed he was looking at her out of the corner of his eye although he still kept his head down.

Saderia walked over to him. “Are you okay?” she asked in a much gentler voice, and when he looked up at her, she knew she wasn’t the only one surprised by her quick change of tone.

He didn’t look down this time, but his dark brown tail anxiously rustled the leaves on the ground. “I’m fine,” he murmured. His amber eyes were still dull but a tiny, hidden spark of something like hope dimly lit them.

Saderia lifted a paw and gently wiped the blood away from his face, smiling kindly and reassuringly at him when he jumped at the touch. They sat in silence for a while and then Saderia said quietly, “I’ve been trying to talk to you, you know. I want to get to know you.”

His gaze was confused, yet hopeful. “Why would you want to do that? Haven’t you heard, or noticed? I’m the freak, remember?”

“You’re not a freak. Don’t listen to what the others say.”

He sighed. “I usually don’t, but still. Why would someone like you want to have anything to do with someone like me?”

She bristled, but not at him. “Why? Just because I’m a Princess?”

“No,” he replied. “Just because you’re, well, *you*, and I’m just...” He trailed off with a sigh, flicking his eyes to the ground.

She blinked and then smiled at him. “Look,” she told him, “I just try to do what’s right, and I like to help others. You, well, I want to help you... find a friend.”

His head shot up in alarm, his amber eyes wide with surprise. “You want to be my *friend*?” he exclaimed.

“Well...yeah. It’s up to you, I guess...” She tried to smile at him. “We could talk at lunch and at recess and stuff. I’d really like to get to know you, Dash.”

He was beginning to look a little hopeful but then he frowned in confusion and tipped his head to one side. “Dash?”

“You know, like a nickname?” she prompted, grinning at him now.

He shook his head, still confused.

“Nicknames, I think, are what friends call each other,” Saderia explained.

“Friends,” he murmured. But now he was smiling back at her.

Chapter Seven

Unlikely Friendship

“Dash,” he tried it out. He smiled hesitantly at her. “I like it.”

Saderia grinned back at her new almost-friend. She hadn’t seen him smile before; it was a very tender smile. “Great.” Suddenly she realized that they should probably get back before anyone noticed them missing. “Come on, we should get to lunch,” Saderia told him gently, signaling for him to follow her with her tail. Absently, Dash picked up the small paper bag holding his lunch and carried it in his jaws as he followed behind her.

When Saderia reached the walkway where she had dropped her lunch in such a hurry, she quickly picked it up and started toward the lunch building, keeping pace with Dash.

“We could talk at lunch,” she suggested casually. “And then play together at recess.” She desperately wanted to ask him what was wrong and why he had looked so shocked when she had walked in that first day, but she choked the words back. She didn’t dare say anything like that; all her instincts warned her against it.

Eventually, she would find out. But not now. It was way too soon; she would just scare him off again. It was still evident that he was very uncomfortable walking beside her, walking stiffly and uneasily. It was as if he felt she would ask him to stay away from her at any moment. She hoped that he would soon feel more at ease with her, and let herself wonder what it would be like if they became close friends. Something inside her told her it would be great and she smiled at a strong sense of adventure and excitement. She blinked out of her thoughts, then grinned, hoping her Dream sense and instincts were telling her of a great future.

“Yeah...we can talk at lunch...if you want,” Dash murmured uneasily.

“Great!” Saderia exclaimed, picking up the pace as they hurried to the lunchroom.

Once the two of them stepped through the doors, they were greeted by the murmur of animals all throughout the room. Loki was beside them half a second later, having run across the room. She frowned at Saderia, barely noticing Dash.

“It took you forever to finally get here,” she accused in confusion. “I mean, I know you’re not as fast as me”—she grinned haughtily—“but still.” It was then that she became aware of Saderia’s new companion, who shyly looked away from her green gaze. Loki’s eyes widened. “Oh...so that’s the hold-up.” She looked at Saderia and smiled. “Well, I see you’ve found a new friend. I’ll leave you two to talk. Tell me if the L’s bother you.”

Saderia grinned at her. “Thanks, Loki. Um...” She trailed off. “It’s...it’s not like you’re being, well, replaced...”

“Oh, don’t even start worrying about that,” Loki interrupted her with a laugh. “It’s cool, okay? We can still hang out sometimes and I don’t mind being by myself, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. I don’t mind if you have other friends. It’s about time he got one, anyway,” she added with a look at Dash.

He managed a weak smile. “Thanks, Loki.”

“Hey, no problem, Dashenirus. It’s about time you stopped hiding in a corner anyway. And Saderia’s a cool friend, so you lucked out there.”

A flicker of doubt crossed his face but he kept his smile in place. “Thanks.” He paused. “Um...you can call me Dash now, I guess.”

Loki grinned her haughty/friendly smile. “Nickname, huh? Well, I guess I’ve intruded enough.” She started to walk away but paused and turned back to Saderia. “Oh, and watch out for the L’s. No offense to you, Dash, but they’re like vultures when it comes to things like this. Since Dash isn’t exactly, well...”

“Since I’m a freak,” he finished for her flatly.

“Well, since they think that,” Loki amended quickly, “they’re probably going to be all over you to figure out why *you*, a Princess, is hanging out with *you*, a freak.” She turned to each one as she said it, flashing them apologetic looks. “And then they’ll gossip like crazy to whatever poor loser they can get to listen—mostly themselves. So, if you need some sort of defense against them, well, you know where to find me.”

Saderia grinned. “Thanks for the warning. We’ll be on our guard, I guess.”

“Vultures,” Loki muttered, grinning before racing off to her end of the table.

When they were left alone, Dash muttered, “She’s right, you know. Are you *still* sure you want to hang out with me?”

“Do you want to hang out with *me*?” she replied hopefully.

He hesitated, then nodded with a wary look at her. She smiled back encouragingly and flicked her fluffy tail toward their lunch table. Dash followed tentatively as she led the way over to it.

“Where do you want to sit?” she asked.

He shrugged and flicked his dark brown tail nervously toward the other empty end of the table. Saderia walked to the spot, sitting beside Dash on the end, where she took the food out of her paper bag and began to chew.

“Does Grath pick on you a lot?” Saderia asked with a concerned expression, after taking a few bites of her lunch. Her claws unsheathed just thinking about it.

Dash shrugged, keeping his eyes stuck to his paper bag even though he hadn’t opened it, and didn’t look at her. “Yeah,” he replied. “He, and Lizzie and her friends, always do that. Grath tries to beat me up, and Lizzie and the other two always call me a freak because...well, you’ve heard the rumors.”

Saderia narrowed her eyes. “That’s so wrong! I can’t believe they’d do that!”

He just shrugged again. “It’s no big deal, so don’t worry about it. I’m used to it.”

“It’s still wrong.”

He didn’t reply and kept his gaze trained on his paws, but then he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “So, you don’t like to be treated like a Princess?” he asked, then blinked in shock, maybe realizing that he *was* talking to a Princess. But that quickly passed to be replaced by curiosity.

Saderia sighed. "No, I don't like to be treated like a prissy, stuck-up Princess. I want the others to see past my title to who I really am and I don't want them to treat me any differently. I just want to fit in and have a normal life with my family, and make some friends...normal stuff. I guess I just don't like others to judge me before they get to know me."

"Yeah, I can understand that completely," Dash muttered, almost as if she weren't there and he was talking to himself. Then he turned to her. "I know what that feels like. It's annoying, isn't it? You're nothing but some stupid label to them once they judge you and then you either have to work harder than ever to prove yourself or just go with it and become what they want you to be."

She blinked, surprised, because she realized that was almost exactly how she felt sometimes. "That's how I feel," she told him, then smiled. "You understand?"

He sighed. "I guess."

"To them, I'm the prissy Princess," she told him, somewhat bitterly.

He rolled his eyes. "To them, I'm the shy freak."

"Well, we have something in common there," she said, lightening the mood a little. "See, we could stick together and be friends."

He didn't respond at first, but then he finally looked up at her, interest and hope sparking from his amber eyes. "Maybe," he agreed, before glancing away.

Saderia swallowed another bite of her food then frowned, realizing that Dash hadn't even opened his paper bag. "Aren't you going to eat something?" she asked, gesturing toward his lunch.

He froze for a moment, instantly wary, and avoided her gaze. "I'm not hungry right now," he said carefully.

She frowned; what was he hiding? Then, with a flash of sympathy, she remembered the day that a few berries had spilled out of his lunch, and that was it. Then she recalled the rumors about him and was once again consumed with curiosity, wondering if they were true. But if it were, then all she wanted to do was help him and be a friend to him. "Really?" she

replied, just as carefully. “Because I’m starving. You should eat; we only have this one lunchtime all day.”

But he shook his head and didn’t look her in the eye.

“I won’t make fun of you or anything like that,” she told him softly. There was no point hiding that she knew why he was so reluctant. “If we’re going to be friends, we don’t have to hide from each other. Not that you can’t have your secrets,” she added quickly. “But it’s okay. You should eat.”

Dash sighed, closing his eyes for a second, before opening them. Watching her closely out of the corner of his eye, he reached for his lunch bag with one paw. He hooked a claw in it and held it upside down so that only six berries fell out onto the lunch table. He looked up at her then, his expression wary and guarded as he said in a flat voice, “Well, *that’s* my lunch.”

Saderia stared at the berries; there were even less of them than he had had before, and the rumors about him swirled around in her mind: *He has no parents...he lives in the woods...* Her heart flipped over with concern; she wanted to ask him about the rumors but didn’t dare. Instead she wondered if she could possibly offer him some of her food since she had plenty. But as soon as she had the idea, she knew it was no good since it might hurt his pride or make him defensive. Maybe after they’d become better friends, she could make the offer and finally feel better about the situation.

So instead she just nodded and tried to smile at him carefully. “I like berries.”

He blinked in surprise and stared at her for a long time. But then he suddenly narrowed his amber eyes angrily at her. Saderia’s eyes widened as she realized that when he looked at her like that, he reminded her of someone, although she didn’t know who exactly. She couldn’t quite place it.

“Well?” he growled. “You can stop with the act. Aren’t you going to ask?” His voice was colder and angrier now, too, and she stared in shock.

“Ask what?” she stammered uncertainly.

“If the stupid rumors are true,” he spat. “Everybody does.”

Saderia managed to compose her face into a caring smile although she couldn't shake the icy instinct inside her telling her that he resembled someone she knew...or had known... "I won't ask if you don't want to talk about it," she told him gently. "You don't have to tell me anything yet."

His eyes widened and his hard expression turned into surprise, thankfully relieving Saderia of that nagging instinctual feeling.

"Really?" he asked.

She nodded, smiling warmly at him. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable or anything. You can tell me whatever you want when you're ready."

"Thanks," he murmured, looking down at the six measly berries lying on the table. Silently he took the berries and lapped them up, finishing them with a small, nearly inaudible sigh.

Saderia quickly finished her lunch in silence and gave him a hopeful look. "I brought way too much food this time. I can't eat anymore of it—you can have the rest if you want." She carefully passed him her lunch bag with the remains of her food inside.

Dash watched her warily then hesitantly took the bag and began to eat what was left of the food. Saderia was relieved that she had found a way to help him without being too obvious about it, although he had probably seen through her charade a little bit.

It was silent between them until Saderia couldn't take it anymore and finally decided to just ask him a few basics and maybe make a conversation out of it.

"Do you have a favorite color?" she asked him.

He shrugged. "Blue, I guess."

"Hey, that's my favorite color, too," she said, smiling.

"Really?"

"Yeah, I have a blue room, and stuff like that. I have a bunch of sports stuff like that in my closet, and some stuff I found outside. Oh, and I have a bunch of adventure books too."

He smiled slightly. "That sounds pretty cool. It fits you."

She tipped her head to one side, surprised. “Really? You don’t think a frilly pink and purple room would be more fitting?”

Dash frowned in confusion. “Why would I think that? It’s not like you.”

She paused then smiled. “You’re right. I just...I would think most animals would think that because of the whole Princess thing. I’m glad you don’t think of me that way.”

He shrugged. “You don’t seem like the prissy Princess type.”

“What do I seem like then?” she asked curiously.

He paused uncertainly, then shrugged. “Brave, caring, clever, determined, adventurous, altruistic...” Suddenly he froze, and swallowed uncomfortably, hiding from her gaze as he tried to shrug nonchalantly. “And, well, things like that, I guess.”

Saderia stared, before a glow of warmth and happiness filled her. She didn’t seem to acknowledge the strange premonition-like feeling that came with it. “Thanks,” she said happily. “I didn’t know anyone thought of me like that here.”

He shrugged uncomfortably. “I just...sort of noticed.”

“Well, thanks. For, you know, understanding.”

“No problem,” he muttered, then looked up at her, studying her for a long moment. In his most cautious tone, he asked, “What’s your family like?”

Saderia just shrugged. “My Aunt Cia is sort of the prissy type but even she’s kind of adventurous and she’s really nice. She has good intentions that sometimes don’t go well. My Uncle Jash is really nice, too, and I guess he sort of evens Cia out. My Mom, Karenisha, looks a lot like me and she’s really fun and adventurous. She helps me with...and understands...well, some things.” She wasn’t ready to go into the whole Dastarius plot/ rescuing her family/the Dreams/her instinct/the scroll/the prophecy with Dash yet. Yet? She could never reveal her family’s secret, she scolded herself fiercely. She finished a bit uncomfortably, “And my Dad, Makero, is really nice and supportive. He understands things like

Mom. Mom and Dad know me the best and I'm glad I can finally get to know them now."

Too late, she realized that she had given something away about her past. She froze, hoping against hope he wouldn't ask, and silently tried to figure out what to say if he did. But to her surprise, he didn't seem to notice her slip and just nodded as if everything she had said was perfectly normal. Well... Karenisha and Makero *had* announced what had happened with Dastarius to the forest, not going into too much detail about her involvement, but she didn't think many of the students knew about it. At least, it seemed that way.

"That sounds nice," Dash said. "It's good that you can be so close to them now."

"Yeah, it's great!" Saderia agreed, but then she listened to his words in a different way and frowned. Something was off. He had used the words *can be* and *now*, as if something—like Dastarius—had prevented her from being close to her parents before. Curiously, she was about to ask what he knew about the past but her instinct kicked in and screamed at her not to say anything. It was so sharp that she nearly choked on her words, her mouth hanging open in mid-sentence.

Dash had turned to stare at her in alarm so to cover her pause, she instantly blurted out the first thing that came to mind, "What about your family?"

The second it was out of her mouth, she wanted to claw herself. If the rumors were true, then she had just made a horrible mistake. She didn't want to hurt him or make him leave, but he just might after that. She was the one to look down then, but she peeked at him out of the corner of her eye, wincing when she saw pain and fear flash in the amber depths of his eyes. He abruptly turned away from her, and she noticed that he had unsheathed his claws and was digging them into the seat.

The silence was deafening. Neither said a thing for a very long time, but finally Saderia couldn't stand another second of it. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't know..."

"Yes, you did," he interrupted. "You knew just like everyone else." He closed his eyes for a minute and when he opened them again, his amber

eyes were blazing with pain and anger. “Do you really want to know about my *family*?” he muttered bitterly.

“You don’t have to tell me...” she began.

He shot a glance at her, then looked away, still glaring at something she couldn’t see and clutching the seat below him with his claws. “My father hated my guts, and now he’s dead. My mother apparently hated me and she ran away when I was born. That’s what my *family* is like.” He closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath. “I’m sorry,” he murmured in a quieter, softer voice. “I don’t mean to growl at you.” He opened his eyes and glanced at her. “Think I’m a freak now?”

“No,” she said softly. “I understand. I-I have an idea of how you must feel.” She looked down. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.” But her mind was racing with curiosity and shock as she realized that at least one of the rumors was true! “We can talk about something else.”

He tipped his head to one side and looked at her for a long time, as if trying to tell what she was thinking, and then finally said, “Like what?”

She shrugged. “Whatever you want.”

“Okay... How about you tell me why you wanted to come to school?” He turned to her curiously.

She shrugged. “School’s different and interesting and I like learning new things. And I sort of like the challenge of getting the teachers to see the real me, even if it is kind of annoying.” Then she smiled. “And I wanted to make a friend—like you.”

Dash blinked in surprise at the last part but then a real smile lit up his face. “You really want to be my friend?”

“Of course!” she exclaimed. “You’re really nice and...” Well, she couldn’t exactly tell him about the whole instinct thing. Yet. “And I just have a good feeling about you.”

He raised his eyebrows at that but said nothing at first. Then, his eyes wide with incredulity, he murmured, “I never had a friend before.”

Saderia frowned. “Really? Never?”

“No, everyone thought I was weird because I have no parents—or at least when I had one, he hated me—and because I live in the woods.” He frowned and turned to look at her. “Why don’t you?”

So all of it was true! But Saderia managed to keep a straight and kind face as she told him, “Because I like to help others and I think you’re a really good animal. I’m not shallow like the others, and I, well, I can kind of understand what you might feel. I had some bad things in my past, too; my life never has been and probably, hopefully, never will be the supposed pampered life of a prissy Princess.”

For the longest time, Dash stared at her until his expression, torn between curiosity and confusion, turned hopeful. “Thanks,” he said happily. “...No one’s ever said anything like that.” He smiled happily at her now. “You’re really nice and you’re a cool friend, Saderia.”

She beamed at him. “Thanks, I hoped I’d get it right. I haven’t exactly had a bunch of friends either. Loki was the first one I ever had, and apart from her...well, I haven’t met a lot of animals.” She smiled, a little embarrassed then. “Loki’s a friend, but so far I’ve never had a best friend.”

His tail swished back and forth excitedly. “Neither have I. Maybe you will be my best friend!” he exclaimed but then his eyes seemed to widen and in an instant, he was looking down, embarrassed and alarmed. “I mean...”

“Don’t worry about it! I want you to be my best friend, too,” she told him. “You don’t have to be so wary around me. Just have fun!” When he looked up sheepishly, but smiling, her eyes glowed hopefully. To make him happier, instead of shy and upset, had been a difficult task but she was glad to see him so exuberant.

Dash beamed at her. “You’re a really great animal, Saderia.”

Saderia’s tail flicked in embarrassment but before she could say something, Lizzie and the other L’s stepped over to them and glared at Dash. Without permission, they all sat simultaneously next to Saderia, still glaring at the dark brown lion. Sighing silently, Saderia muttered, “L’s, what do you want?”

Lizzie shot her a hostile glance. “Would you stop calling us the L’s, Princess?”

Saderia raised her eyebrows. “I’ll stop calling you the L’s when you stop calling me Princess,” she retorted.

Lizzie’s angry glare lingered on her until she felt she had scorched Saderia enough, and then she turned to look at Dash, curling her lip. “Why were you talking to *him*?” she asked in a disgusted voice, like one she might use if she found a cockroach in her food.

Saderia narrowed her eyes, feeling a growl start to rise in her throat. It took everything she had to hold it back. Glaring at them, she hissed, “Dash is my friend. If you can’t take that then...”

“Your *friend*?” Lizzie interrupted, her eyes widening. “Why would you want to be friends with *him*?”

“Haven’t you heard the rumors?” Lily spoke up. “They’re all true, you know.”

“Yes, Lily, I’ve heard the rumors,” Saderia said in a cold but bored voice, rolling her eyes. Maybe if she didn’t allow them to see her bitterness, they would leave. “And guess what! Whether they’re true or not, I don’t care, because Dash is a good friend no matter what you guys think.”

“But he’s weird!” Lisa burst out. “And not just because of the rumors. He always stays in a corner away from everyone else and...and he’s really creepy sometimes!”

Saderia shot a glance at Dash to see that he wasn’t looking at anyone but his tail laid flat and he kept his face hidden, his ears flattened. She whirled back around to the L’s, glaring now. “Just because someone’s shy or different from you doesn’t mean they’re weird.”

“Says you,” Lily snapped.

“Fine, by that logic, you’re all weird because you’re not normal by my standards. Lizzie, you’re annoying, Lily, you’re a follower, and Lisa, you’re not doing what you want and just going along with them to fit in!”

Lisa paled. “I am not!”

Lizzie barely spared a glance at her, her glare still on Saderia. “*What* are you calling him anyway?” she asked.

“Dash.” Saderia turned around as he spoke. He was looking at the L’s with an unreadable expression. “If you don’t like it,” he continued,

“then that’s really your problem, not ours.”

Lizzie glared at him. “Oh, so the freak can talk,” she mocked in a cold, sarcastic voice. “Why are you even *trying* to hang out with the Princess anyway? Don’t you know you’re not good enough?”

“You’re not even good enough to be in the presence of a mosquito, much less the Princess of the forest,” Lily spoke up.

Dash frowned, then sighed, turning away from them. “You’re probably right.”

“No, they aren’t,” Saderia stepped in rapidly. “Look L’s. I’m not going to tell you again, so I’ll just say this: My life is my business, not yours. I’m not your entertainment or your friend or anything. Please leave me alone if you don’t like what I do.”

“You’re stupid. I think...!”

“No, you don’t think, because you were born without a brain, poor thing.” Lizzie was interrupted by a familiar voice and Saderia glanced up to see Loki hovering over the L’s with her haughty smile.

Lizzie glared at the cheetah. “What are you doing here, cheepard?”

“What are you?” Loki shot back.

“We’re trying to figure out why the Princess would want to hang out with *him*,” Lily explained, giving Dash a reproachful look.

Loki arched an eyebrow. “Really? Because that doesn’t seem like any of your business to me.”

“No one cares...” Lizzie trailed off, glaring at the cheetah, but then she sneered at Loki when something seemed to dawn on her. “Actually, Loki, why are you defending them? After all, wasn’t the Princess your friend...”

“My name is Saderia,” Saderia interrupted.

“Fine,” Lizzie muttered, rolling her eyes as she went on, “Wasn’t Saderia your friend before, and now you’re being replaced? Why would you defend them if you’re just going to be forgotten?”

It was Loki’s turn to roll her eyes. “Are we really going to go there, Lizzie? Sigh. All right, look, as long as they’re both having a good time, I

don't really care if I'm involved. I'm a loner, and Saderia can have other friends. She's not my pawn; I make friends, not followers, Lizzie." She gave Lily and Lisa a significant stare as she continued, "We can still hang out but that's none of your business."

"You apparently can't tell when you're not wanted." Lizzie sneered at her.

"No, I think you're looking in a mirror, Lizzie," Loki retorted.

Lizzie let out a 'humph.' "Just get out of here!"

"L's first."

"Fine!" Apparently at her wits' end, the lioness stood up angrily and her two 'friends' went with her. Lizzie glared at Saderia. "I sure hope you're happy with that freak!" she spat.

There was nothing nice about that comment but Saderia just smiled sweetly at the lioness, knowing the fight was won. "Thank you, Lizzie. I hope you're happy with your freaks, too."

"Weirdo," Lizzie muttered as she and her friends stalked away to another part of the table.

"Someone needs to swat her like the mosquito she is," Loki commented, watching her go.

Saderia grinned. "Thanks for standing up for me, Loki."

The cheetah grinned at her. "Believe me, it was my pleasure."

"Yeah, thanks, Loki," Dash spoke up hesitantly. "You too, Saderia."

Saderia grinned back at him, wanting to wave away the praise, when Loki said, "Uh oh. What now?"

Saderia and Dash both turned to look in the direction she indicated and Saderia's immediate reaction was to unsheathe her claws in an irrepressible surge of protectiveness. Grath was glaring at them, his blue eyes narrowed in fury. Obviously the humiliation he had suffered at having to run from a Princess had not improved his attitude. Saderia narrowed her eyes at him and hissed a sharp warning and he turned away angrily.

Loki raised an eyebrow. "What'd you do to him? Or what'd *he* do to *you*?"

Saderia sighed. "Well, he sort of attacked me..."

"What?" Loki exclaimed, her green eyes widening in alarm and then narrowing in anger. "Are you okay? Do you want me to teach him a lesson I'll make sure he won't ever forget?"

"That's okay," Saderia said. "I beat him."

"Really?" There was surprise but also admiration in her tone. She smiled. "Well, congrats. It's about time he got what he deserved! Pretty cool!"

"Er, thanks," Saderia replied uncomfortably. Her unease was not hard to decipher.

"Don't worry about it." Both Dash and Loki said it at the same time. They paused and when Dash stayed silent, Loki continued, "If he or the teachers have a problem with it, I'll back you up," she assured her.

Saderia relaxed, smiling with gratitude. Fighting on her record might convince the teachers she wasn't prissy but it definitely wouldn't endear them to her. "That would be great, Loki."

Loki grinned before racing back to her side of the table, pausing to call tauntingly, "Pretty embarrassing, huh, Grath?" to which he replied, "Shut up, cheepard." Loki just laughed and sat down to eat.

"I'll help you if the teachers get mad, too," Dash added as Saderia turned back around to face him.

"Are you sure?" she asked cautiously.

He shrugged. "Yeah, I'm sure. They'll listen to me. They feel sorry for me."

His tone of voice suggested he didn't appreciate it, perhaps even feeling embarrassed by it. Saderia wanted to say something to make him feel better but froze. Shame colored her face; was she only befriending him in an act of pity, because she felt sorry for him, too? But no, that wasn't true. She really did think he was a good animal and would be a good friend. Besides, her instinct was urging her on, so it must be more than that.

She said none of that, and instead told him, "Well, if you don't like it, then you might be able to convince the teachers not to feel that way. That's what I'm trying to do."

The surprise was clear on his face but, after a second, he blinked warmly. “Yeah, I guess I’ll try that,” he replied.

Then, over the buzz of conversation, they heard Ms. Spot and Ms. Zanah call that lunch was over and it was time for recess. Together, Saderia and Dash both got up from their seats and took their lunches over to the trash cans before they began to run toward the door to go outside.

“So what do you want to do at recess?” Dash asked excitedly, smiling his sweet smile again.

Saderia’s amber eyes gleamed with joy at his now cheery disposition. She knew she had made a new friend. “We could play tag,” she suggested just as happily.

“That sounds good,” he agreed as they burst out of the lunchroom and onto the recess field.

“In that case, you’re it!” Saderia exclaimed, tapping him with her tail before bolting off across the playground.

“Hey!” he protested playfully, racing after her.

Saderia darted around the playground, her paws thudding against the ground as Dash bolted after her. “You’ll never catch me!” she called teasingly over her shoulder, leaping onto the steps leading onto the big play-tower in the center of the playground.

“Oh yeah?” he retorted, leaping after her.

Saderia climbed higher and higher up the play-tower until she reached the top where the slide was, and slid down it, racing off when she reached the bottom.

She ran at full speed over to the jungle gym where she quickly began to climb up the interlocking bars to the top and then back down the other side. When she reached the ground again, she looked back but Dash wasn’t there. Frowning, she turned back around but suddenly he was there and tapped her with his tail.

“Got you!” he proclaimed, laughing at her baffled expression.

“Hey, how’d you do that?” she exclaimed, but he had already raced off and she quickly followed.

She chased him past the basketball hoop and then up the tower again. He jumped to the ground when he reached a lower part and she quickly jumped after him, landing beside him and flicking her tail across him before bolting off. The game continued for a while but then, when Saderia was running down from the jungle gym, she stopped instantly, and Dash skidded to a halt beside her.

“What?” he asked in confusion.

But Saderia didn’t answer, too busy staring at Ms. Spot, who was glaring at her with poorly disguised bitterness. Dash followed her gaze and rolled his eyes. After a few more moments of hesitation, Ms. Spot walked stiffly over to them, continuing to glower at Saderia.

Then she turned her gaze on Dash, making it a bit kinder. “You’re playing with the Princess, Dashenirus?” she asked in a voice that was trying hard not to sound angry but failing.

He said nothing at first, then, “Yeah, I am. Except my name’s Dash now. And her name’s Saderia.”

The teacher’s tail flicked in surprise but she recovered and hissed, “Can’t you find some other friends?”

“What’s wrong with being friends with Saderia? She’s the only one that doesn’t think of me as a freak or feel sorry for me,” he told her carefully.

Ms. Spot blinked her moss green eyes as Saderia felt the need to speak up, “Look, Ms. Spot, I just want to fit in and make friends, and Dash is really nice. Why are you so angry about this?”

“I’m not angry,” she hissed defensively, before turning her back to them and stalking away. She was followed by the curious gazes of Saderia and Dash.

“Why can’t they leave me alone?” Saderia muttered.

Dash just shrugged. “They’ll eventually get over it.”

“Hopefully.”

A few minutes later, Ms. Spot and Ms. Zanah called all of the students inside when recess was over. Saderia and Dash had to sit in their

separate seats in math and science, both feeling disappointed that they couldn't sit together.

"So, are you two friends now?" Loki asked Saderia when she took her seat beside the cheetah.

"I think so," Saderia whispered back. "He's really nice."

"Well, it's about time he found someone to hang out with."

Their conversation was cut short as Ms. Zanah glided into the room and began the last part of their class. Saderia was itching for it to be over so that she could talk to Dash again. Her eyes never left the clock; she was practically falling out of her chair when the clock finally struck the hour, and they were released from class. After she and the other animals had packed their book bags to go home, Saderia padded over to Dash's desk in the back to talk to him before they were dismissed.

"So do you want to play together tomorrow?" Saderia asked him, unable to keep the anticipation out of her voice.

He smiled back at her eagerly. "Sure."

Saderia relaxed, feeling almost...relieved. "It'll be really fun! We can hang out some other times, too!"

"Yeah, that would be...wait, other times?"

"Well, later on," she told him.

"Uh...yeah, okay."

She frowned at his sudden change of mood but decided not to question it. "We can just play together at school for a while."

"That'll be fun," he agreed, starting to perk up again.

Mr. Delaca's voice crackled over the intercom and dismissed everybody then, making them jump. "Come on," Dash said briskly. "We should get to our homes."

Saderia couldn't help but rephrase that in her mind as *she* should get to her home and *he* should get to the woods. Slightly disgusted with herself at that somewhat judgmental thought, she said nothing and followed him out of the door and down the hall.

"So how are you liking school so far?" he asked her as they walked.

Saderia recovered from her self-directed bitterness and flashed him a happy look. “It’s pretty good so far. How do you like it?”

He shrugged. “It’s okay.”

Turning to him with a concerned expression at his unhappy tone, she asked, “What’s wrong? You don’t like it here?” She paused. “Is it because of Grath and the L’s? Because now that we’re friends we could probably keep them away.”

“It’s not just them,” he muttered. “I don’t get half the stuff Ms. Spot tries to teach us.” Because he has no one at home to help him, Saderia couldn’t help but think as she stared at him. “I don’t know how I’m ever going to make something of myself,” he finished more quietly.

“I could help you,” she blurted. “I know most of it. I kind of taught myself before I came to school.”

“What did you do before you came to school?” he asked, and then froze, quickly clamping his mouth shut except to say, “You don’t have to tell me, though.”

She shrugged, not about to say anything about his sudden, strange reaction, though it did make the fur on her neck rise ever so slightly. “Cia and Uncle Jash gave me these stupid tutors that came to my house, and they didn’t really teach me anything. I just used their homework as a distraction from...well, some things. I basically just taught myself out of books and stuff, and then when I got my parents back...” She trailed off and this time she was the one to freeze. “My parents let me go to school, which is what I wanted,” she awkwardly glossed over her slip, unwilling to talk about it now.

“Oh,” he said, and again she stared at him in surprise. How could he have not caught such a huge and obvious slip? Maybe he was just trying to be nice by not intruding in her business and for that she felt grateful. That must be it; for the moment, it seemed best to ignore the weird feeling she was getting.

She picked up the pace and tried to lighten the mood again. “Come on, we’d better hurry. It’s always fun to hang out with my family.”

He nodded absently and walked alongside her, opening his mouth to make a light comment but stopped abruptly. A horrified look much like the one she had seen on her first day crossed his face. “Your parents...” he stammered, turning to look at her with a terrified expression. “Will they be out there waiting for you?”

Saderia frowned and tipped her head to the side, baffled by his sudden fear. “Yes,” she said carefully. “But why...?”

“I have to go back,” he interrupted briskly. “I, uh, left something behind. You should just go without me...it might take a while. I’ll see you tomorrow,” he finished fearfully before whirling around and racing back toward the classroom without giving her time to say anything.

Blinking, she watched him leave, her mouth hanging open in surprise. She stared at the spot where he had disappeared back inside the classroom for a long moment before shaking her head to clear it and beginning to pad away. “Okay...” she murmured, her eyes now wide, unfocused and confused. Why would he...? But she stopped, suddenly realizing that her parents *were* the King and Queen so he might be a little nervous about meeting them. That must have been why he had reacted so quickly and run away. That and nothing else.

Shrugging it off, she padded toward the door of the atrium but stopped when she heard a familiar but annoying voice call her back.

“Saderia! Get back here for a minute.”

Internally groaning, Saderia turned around and saw Lolista sitting near the door to the office a few paces away, her ice blue expression carefully devoid of any emotion. With a sigh, Saderia pushed through the throng of moving animals and stumbled over to her. “What do you want?” she asked when she had finally reached her.

Lolista hesitated for a long, uncomfortable moment, before asking, “That lion, Dashenirus...were you hanging out with him?”

It was Saderia’s turn to pause. “What’s it to you?” she hedged.

Just like that, Lolista’s subdued expression thawed like the ice in her eyes. Rolling her eyes, the lioness hissed in annoyance. “Just answer the question.”

“Fine,” she muttered. “He’s my friend. Again, what’s it to you?”

“Your *what*?” the lioness practically shrieked. Several heads turned to them in alarm and Saderia tried to shrink from view.

“*You are friends with...?*” Taking a deep breath, Lolista let the sentence hang and immediately got control of herself. More calmly, she inquired, “Why would you want to be friends with him?” It was as if her hysterics had never happened.

But Saderia hissed and rolled her eyes. “You know, I should have guessed you were like the rest of them. He’s not weird, he’s nice, and just because I’m a Princess doesn’t mean I can’t be friends with him. Don’t harass me about it like the L’s and Ms. Spot, please.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Fine, I won’t. It was just a question.”

“Well, sorry, but I’m a little touchy about it after everyone else making such a big deal out of...”

“Well, listen,” Lolista cut her off, now completely recovered from her initial shock. “Everyone else is what I wanted to tell you about. Your teachers might treat you worse than before. They think you’re trying to show off and act like a good little Princess just to impress your Mommy and Daddy for a while. They think you’ll eventually give it up and that you’re just messing with them now, so they’re probably going to treat you worse than before.”

Saderia groaned. “Great.” Then she frowned and looked at the bright lioness in confusion. “But how do you know this?”

“I have my ways. Listening in is one of them,” she replied.

“Okay...but why would you help me? I thought you hated me.”

Lolista rolled her eyes. “Cut the dramatics. You can either use my warning or not.”

Saderia’s face grew a little hot; perhaps she *was* being a bit too theatrical. “Fine, I’ll use it. Anything else?”

“Do I look like a fortune teller?” Lolista sighed exasperatedly. “I guess there is something else. Delaca wants to see you sometime next week and he’s the most prejudiced one around here. You’re probably going to walk out of that meeting worse off than before unless you somehow manage

to convince everyone you're not Hurricane Princess by next week, which I doubt."

Saderia hissed in frustration. "Well, that's great. Fine, I guess I'll prepare for that."

"Do that."

Saderia started to walk away to find her parents outside but Lolista called her back, her expression hard and curious but otherwise unreadable.

"That...lion you're friends with," she began. "You're close to him?"

Saderia hesitated. "Yes," she replied warily.

"But does he sometimes act a little...well, *strange*, maybe?"

She bristled. "He's not...!"

"Don't put words in my mouth, Princess. Just tell me if he does queer things once in a while. I'm not insulting him, I'm just curious."

"He's...well, I suppose he does act a little odd sometimes but that's..."

"No more questions," Lolista interrupted, the corners of her lips turning up in a cold smile. "Have a nice day, Saderia."

With that, she walked back into the office, leaving behind a very bemused Saderia. After a moment, Saderia just stepped away to go find her parents, wondering why everyone and everything seemed so strange and... secretive all of a sudden.

Chapter Eight

Unbelievable

Looking back on what had happened that day, Dash concluded that he had completely lost his mind. Finally he was safely back in his woods after having run to his clearing as soon as all the other animals had left the school, fearing being seen. Thankfully, Saderia hadn't waited for him and he was able to escape unnoticed.

Lying in the woods, he briefly remembered how Grath had been about to beat him up for whatever reason but he hardly cared about that. It was nothing compared to the other things that had happened to him in the past. So Dash had simply been waiting for Grath to get it over with so he could just be on his way, almost feeling bored by his threats; all right, he'd been a little scared because he wouldn't walk away without pain, but he was used to it.

And then, of all the animals that could have found him in that moment, it was Saderia who had come running to them out of nowhere. She had actually challenged Grath, telling him to leave him alone. Of course, the first thought that came to his mind was one of worry that she would get hurt but he quickly realized that that was pointless, almost an insult to her. Saderia had gone up against much worse than an insignificant school bully like Grath. Then, normally, he would've feared for himself at her nearness, but he was tired of that game. He just stayed put, waiting for what would happen next.

Grath had attacked her and, despite how he knew she could handle it, he was instantly afraid for her. But she fought back much better than Grath and sent him running away from her as fast as he could go. Dash had been amazed by how well she had fought, but then he had wondered if that was how she had fought...well, someone else he wasn't going to let himself think about again.

When she had approached him and said that she had been trying to get to know him, he was past being alarmed by what she said so he was just confused. Why would she want to have anything to do with him, other than to find out why he was such a freak or if the rumors about him were true? But, to his surprise, she didn't ask about any of that. She said she wanted to be his friend. That had shocked him—friends with Princess Saderia?!—but his annoying hope had taken over rational thought. For one moment, it didn't matter that Saderia had the power to destroy him, that she was a Princess, or that she was involved in his horrible past. All that mattered was that maybe somebody did care, something he had almost obsessively wanted but didn't dare hope for.

He had never had a friend in his whole life. His parents hadn't been his friends and none of the kids at school had wanted to be the friend of a freak. The teachers were nice to him, but they just pitied him and he didn't want their pity. No matter who Saderia was or what she had done in the past, maybe he could be her friend...at least until she uncovered his secret.

But he ignored that doubt that time. No matter how much it might hurt later on, he didn't care. Saderia seemed really nice and he already knew a few things about her. He didn't really think of her as a Princess in the way the other kids did. He still hadn't figured out whether he should hate her or not but he didn't; his mind was made up and he wasn't going to rethink it. He did want to be her friend. She actually seemed serious, too, and he liked the nickname she gave him. It made him feel like he was finally accepted and had someone he could rely on.

Of course, he had still been wary around her at first, thinking for sure she'd suddenly realize the awful truth and it'd be all over. Being friends with Princess Saderia was like juggling active grenades, even though he had already concluded that, somehow, she hadn't already told her parents about him or at least hadn't said his name. How he could get that lucky, he had no idea but he had a sinking feeling it might not last long. Eventually she would tell her parents about him if they were going to be friends. But—his eyes widened at his good fortune—maybe she would use his new nickname now and they wouldn't recognize it. What great timing!

Still, he had still been cautious, for not only that reason, but also because he was afraid he'd say something that would change her mind

about being friends with him and make her realize what a freak he really was. She'd leave, ruining the one chance he had to find a friend. But she hadn't run away, even when he'd asked for it, which shocked him but also made him feel happy and hopeful.

At lunch they had talked about how the others saw them as just labels and he had felt bitter about that. He had never really thought about it, too caught up with more disturbing thoughts. But it was a relatively safe subject. And he was delighted to see that Saderia seemed surprised and happy that he had understood how she felt.

The moment was destined to be ruined, though, when Saderia had asked him if he were going to eat any of his pathetic lunch of six berries. In the middle of winter, finding things to eat out in the woods was getting harder and harder and he hardly ever had enough to eat. And he was afraid that she would guess the hard truths about him and his life if she saw that. The rumors going around weren't too bad, but he didn't want her to know about anything else, like how hard he really was struggling.

She had unexpectedly told him that she wouldn't make fun of him and she would understand, effectively taking him off guard. Then it was glaringly obvious that she had already guessed the rumors were true. Defensiveness was natural. The mean look he'd given her after he'd dumped out his measly lunch was something he definitely regretted. But, surprisingly, she hadn't actually said anything about the rumors. Usually everybody asked right away, so he had ended up looking like a complete jerk, dumbly asking her why she wasn't asking.

But despite him being so cold, she had smiled and said that he didn't have to talk about it if he didn't want to. There was really nothing predictable about Saderia. She was nice and understanding about it and he liked her even more than before, despite the guilt that plagued him about his defensiveness. Then she offered to give him some of her lunch and her intention was obvious. Bitterly, he realized that she probably felt sorry for him like the teachers. But she seemed to want to help everybody, not just him in particular, so he took it just to make her feel better, though he still felt a bit uncomfortable about it.

After that, they had talked about normal stuff like their favorite colors. Saderia had told him about her room, then asked why he didn't think it was weird for a Princess to have that kind of room. For a moment, he had been puzzled, wondering why she would ask a question like that. It took him only a moment to remember that the other kids had seen her as a prissy Princess type and that she hated that, so he had just told her he didn't think of her in that way. She had asked what he *did* think of her and he'd just shrugged and told her...until he realized that he shouldn't know some of those things about her when they'd just met; all those things had come from what he'd thought of her in the past.

He had tried to cover it up but he could hear how stupid he sounded and wanted to claw himself. And yet Saderia seemed happy rather than suspicious so he let it drop. Then he'd made a bad mistake in asking her about her family, but he was just so incredibly curious about what it was like for her after she had gotten her parents back. He was glad to hear how supportive, nice and happy her family sounded now that everything was okay. But therein lie the mistake: he had said that he was glad she was able to be close to them *now*. And too late he had realized what a huge slip he had made, and was only able to hope she wouldn't notice. She had opened her mouth like she wanted to say something, which made all the fur on his back stand on end; it was over. But it wasn't. What had followed was worse, though, when she asked about his family.

Well, he probably had it coming by asking about her family and there was no way to get around it. Plus, there was the fact that'd she'd probably ask sooner or later, but it was virtually impossible not to get defensive and angry at the mention of his so-called, disgusting excuse for a *family*. She had heard the rumors for sure, but there was still no excuse for the mean way he'd acted. He told her the short version of his *family*, probably sounding like the biggest jerk/freak alive, but she had responded only with kindness.

Why couldn't he have just melted right there? He hated himself for being so cruel, but her enthusiasm was catchy and he really did believe that Saderia was a truly great animal. He began to realize that she really did care, and that he just might have found a friend.

He had changed the subject and asked why she had come to school, and she'd told him a lot of other reasons but the one that stuck out most was the last part about wanting a friend...like him. Dash had been surprised and was amazed that she still wanted anything to do with him. He had tried to warn her off, saying that everyone else thought he was weird but he didn't want her to leave, although it might have been better if she had. Perhaps it was time to test the waters. He'd quickly just blurted out the vague version of the truth about having no parents and living in the woods.

And she hadn't reacted! She hadn't reacted to any of the slips he had made and had just been a good friend to him. That was amazing. He could hardly believe that maybe this once he had gotten lucky, like Loki had said, and made a good friend. Saderia said something about them maybe being *best* friends and he literally couldn't remember the last time he'd been so high-spirited.

Later, Lizzie and her friends, the L's as Saderia and Loki called them, had showed up and attempted to ruin the moment. He had tried to stick up for Saderia a little bit and she had stuck up for him, not fazed by their taunts. Loki had come, as well, and got them to leave, even when they taunted her about losing Saderia as a friend. Secretly, Dash was really glad that Loki didn't mind him taking Saderia's friendship.

They had gone out to play at recess, something he had never done since he usually just sat on the benches away from everyone else, and it was fun! They played tag and he was a little nervous about it at first but Saderia was easy to have fun with! He began to wonder if it could be like that every day, that he might have something to look forward to when he woke up from nightmares, and it already seemed a little easier to keep going. Saderia seemed like she wanted to help the world, and him in particular right now, and he was beginning to think that maybe she could. Maybe he *could* be her best friend...

Later, she had come over to his desk at the end of the day. She said they could play together tomorrow and he was very quick and excited to agree. Saderia had said she'd help him understand some of the things the teachers tried to teach him. He was beginning to feel a bit better about their friendship...but then he remembered.

He had frozen like a block of ice, remembering it all too clearly and thinking about her parents, who were waiting outside to take their daughter home. They would surely recognize him when he stepped outside with Saderia. He couldn't face them and let them see him so he had made up some lame excuse to go run back to get something and take hours doing it, telling her to go on without him. She'd have to be stupid not to see through it, and it was clear that she did.

Now he wondered if she'd guessed his secret and if he was waiting to walk into an ambush the next day at school. Even if he wasn't, Saderia might not be friends with him because of that rude and suspicious exit. Yet he had to go there just in case there was a chance nothing bad had happened. But Dash couldn't help wondering that if they did become close friends, how long would he be able to hide his horrible secret?

On Friday, as Dash walked to school, he tried to brace himself for whatever he might have to face, but when he stepped into Ms. Spot's classroom and saw Saderia look up and smile at him from her seat, he let all of it go, just happy to see her. And happy to see that he wouldn't have to run. *Yet...*

"Hi, Dash!" she called getting up from her seat and rushing over to him.

He couldn't help but smile back at her. "Hi, Saderia."

Ms. Spot wasn't in the classroom at the moment so, as usual, there was the loud, collective sound of all the animals talking. The only one who wasn't getting in on any of the many conversations was Loki, who sat back in her chair, looking over some notes and glancing at a magazine.

"Hey, cheepard," Grath called from across the room.

"Yes, panthoron?" Loki responded, not even glancing in his direction. "That's a cross between a panther and a moron, by the way."

Grath curled his lip and turned away without saying anything; Loki just chuckled softly to herself. Lizzie and her friends—the L's—were glaring at them from their desks and talking in whispers, probably gossiping about them. Like he cared.

Turning to Saderia, he asked, “So, um, we’ll just hang out today like yesterday?”

Saderia smiled and nodded. “Yeah, and we can play at recess again.” She hesitated. “After you, um, *left* yesterday, my parents were waiting for me and I told them I had a new friend: you!”

Dash felt his mouth go dry but he tried to stay calm; after all, nothing was happening. “Really?” he asked carefully. “What’d you tell them?”

“Just about how I, well, rescued you from Grath and that we played at recess and stuff.”

Hoping with all his heart that she hadn’t said his real name, he asked, “And were they, um...happy that we’re friends?”

She tipped her head to one side. “Of course! Why wouldn’t they be?”

He wanted to ask more questions to see how they’d reacted. Had they been angry, upset, suspicious...? Maybe they hadn’t reacted at all, and just hadn’t let Saderia know that anything was wrong. Maybe they were waiting to strike without her knowing. He wanted to ask which name she’d used for him but he knew he’d just end up sounding weird and suspicious. So all he could do was keep his mouth shut and hope that nothing was going to happen, just nodding at her.

“And my parents and I planned to go out to explore in the woods together. I always think that’s fun.”

Dash clamped his jaws together to keep the words *What woods?* from coming out since it was an irrational question. The chances of them going into his woods were not very high, and even though he seemed to attract bad luck, he suspected they would just explore the woods around their house, which he knew was nowhere around his woods. He had made sure of that when he had run away.

“That sounds great,” he told her instead. “So you like adventures and stuff like that, then?”

“Adventures are my favorite thing in the world!” she exclaimed, then paused, adding, “Even if sometimes they are a little scary.”

Only he would know what she was referring to. He guessed that she might tell him about her past one day when they were better friends, but he wasn't looking forward to that day since he would have to play dumb. But, at the same time, he was curious to see how much she had figured out and what specifically she had gone through.

"I get that," he agreed nonchalantly.

"Cool." Again she paused then looked at him expectantly. "You can come, if you want."

Dash froze, his mind whirling as he tried to think of some way to respond to that without sounding insane. But all he could think of was: *No way, no way, no way.* He could never, *ever*, let her parents see him. He was already pushing it by befriending her, but how was he going to get out of this? "I...I can't," he sputtered. "Um...I just...I have something to do that day..."

He closed his eyes briefly, thinking about what a moron he was and how much he wanted to slap himself. Okay, he lived in the woods and Saderia knew it as well as he did. What particular something would he have to do in the woods that would take all day? Couldn't he ever say or do anything right? Everything always came out wrong and whatever he did always ended in disaster, it seemed, even when it was something as minor as this.

Saderia tipped her head in confusion and Dash sat rigidly still, hoping she wouldn't question it. He half-hoped she would walk away and change her mind about them being friends so he wouldn't have to deal with it, but at the same time he hoped she would stay.

"Um...okay," she agreed uncertainly. "Maybe Sunday then." Hesitantly she said, "We can just go together on Sunday."

There was a long hesitation and then Dash asked, "Just...us?" *And not the King and Queen?*

When she nodded, he let himself breathe. Maybe he could go with her that day and have fun with her without worrying about the King and Queen breathing down his neck. Maybe. "I guess that would be okay," he said hesitantly.

“Okay.” Saderia paused and glanced down for a moment, then looked back up at him with caring eyes. “I can understand if you’re kind of nervous to be around the King and Queen, you know. You can just tell me.” Dash almost jumped, but then she went on, “I mean, they *are* royalty so I guess it can be a little intimidating...”

With an inward sigh of relief, he realized she wasn’t talking specifically about him and just the fact that everyone would find it a little weird and intimidating to be around the King and Queen of the whole forest. Then he brightened; this could be his excuse for acting so weird!

“Y-yeah, that’s why I’m a little uncomfortable,” he said, speaking in a kind of dejected tone to get her to believe it. “Sorry, I know how you’re kind of sensitive about the royalty thing but...well, they rule the whole forest.”

She smiled encouragingly at him. “That’s okay, I understand. You can meet them when you’re ready.”

Looking at her friendly and understanding expression, Dash groaned silently and felt like kicking himself. Great, now he was lying to her. Again. And okay, so not telling her every detail of his disturbing past wasn’t exactly lying, but still. He wasn’t exactly coming clean about a few things either.

It wasn’t entirely a lie; he was nervous about meeting the King and Queen...just for a different reason than what she thought. But he still felt guilty for deceiving her, even if he hadn’t really had a choice.

“Thanks,” he muttered, feeling like a worm. He looked down, unable to meet her friendly gaze and know that he didn’t deserve it.

Suddenly Saderia flicked Dash lightly with her tail and he practically jumped to the ceiling in surprise. When he landed, he sat there, blinking at her in shock.

“Sorry if I startled you, but you were doing it again,” she explained.

Lying? Alarm set him on edge but he managed to keep a straight expression and tip his head to one side in hopefully convincing confusion. “Doing what?”

“Not looking me in the eye and looking so...sad,” Saderia replied. “You don’t have to hide.”

Feeling embarrassed, Dash managed a weak, sheepish smile. “Sorry,” he apologized.

“That’s all right.” She smiled at him again. “So Sunday we can go out in the woods to explore and play and stuff?”

“Um, sure... What woods?” It wasn’t such a horrible question now.

“Well, we can go to your woods if you want.” This time she seemed uncertain and looked down as she said it. “If you don’t mind.”

His mind instantly scanned every inch of his clearing to try to remember if there was some clue to his past there. He had brought some stuff from his old home and put in a tree hollow to make sure it stayed safe. But he couldn’t remember everything that he had brought so he didn’t want to risk it. He also didn’t want to give away too much about not only his past, but his life in the woods. He didn’t want to give Saderia any reason to feel sorry for him. But he also didn’t want to make her feel uncomfortable or make himself seem even more secretive than he already was. He’d have a whole day, Saturday, to make sure everything was fine, so it wasn’t a big deal. He could get rid of any traces of the past for the day and make it seem like he wasn’t really struggling.

“Sure,” he told her. “We can go there.”

She looked up. “Are you sure it’s all right with you? I don’t want to intrude...”

“It’s fine,” he bluffed. “We can just meet in front of the school on Sunday morning and I’ll take you there.”

“Okay,” she agreed. “I’ll ask my parents for permission but I doubt they’ll have any problem with it.”

Dash wasn’t so sure, especially if they had guessed who he was, but maybe this would give him a chance to know if they had gotten the clue or not. The thought crossed his mind that maybe they *shouldn’t* let Saderia go with him to his woods or anywhere for that matter, but he pushed it away, not letting himself go there.

Just then Ms. Spot walked in and glared at them, ending their conversation as she sent them back to their seats.

“I’ll see you at lunch,” Saderia hissed to him before retreating to her seat beside Loki, who grinned at her and whispered something he couldn’t catch.

For the rest of the class period, Dash tried to pay attention to what Ms. Spot was saying but he was far away and could hardly understand any of it anyway. He was too busy trying to figure out what to do about his friendship with Saderia and whether it could actually work out or not. Then it was time for Art Area and the whole class lined up to go to the library, a normal thing that everyone was used to. He was so used to it that he forgot Saderia didn’t feel the same way.

“Hi,” she whispered, walking over to stand by him in line. “Where are we going?”

He blinked before realizing that she had never been before. “Library,” he told her quietly. “You can just read there or check out new books that have to be returned next time.”

She nodded, and they walked together with the rest of the class down the hall until they reached the library that was just a few paces away from the front atrium. Once they stepped inside, they instantly quieted, some just out of fear that Ms. Spot would yell at them, before they all wandered off somewhere to do whatever they wanted.

“Where are all the different books like fiction and adventure and stuff like that?” Saderia whispered to Dash.

“Fiction books are on the left wall,” he pointed across the library. The library had a checkout counter right across from where they had walked in by the door. Shelves of books were spread out across the entire library, except the left side was interrupted by a big carpet with a comfy-looking chair. There were a few cushy chairs and benches around the carpet. On the far left side, across from the check-out counter, was a little space with shelves filled with magazines. The rest of the library was divided up into different sections for different types of books.

“What’s the little carpet for?” Saderia asked quietly.

“That’s for the first graders when they have story time,” he explained.

Saderia nodded in understanding, then headed toward the left wall, probably to look for adventure books. Dash followed after her and hovered nearby as she searched the shelves for what she was looking for.

“This one looks good,” she said after a moment of browsing, pulling one out. “How do I check it out?”

“Just tell them your name and they’ll check it out for you. You have to return it by next Friday.”

“Okay, are you going to get a book?”

“I guess,” he said, as he quickly scanned the shelves for something interesting then walked to the checkout desk with her. The librarian asked him for his name and he told her his real name, waiting for her to quickly check out his book and go on to Saderia. School records, or any records, terrified him. He was pretty sure that no one knew who his father was, or his mother for that matter, but he could never be sure. He had kept it hidden well and his father had certainly never had anything to do with what happened to him, here or otherwise. But there was still a chance. It was especially scary with Saderia standing right there. But then it was over and Dash was inwardly relieved.

The librarian asked Saderia for her name and she told her, probably choosing to ignore the unfriendly look on the librarian’s face.

“Where do we sit?” Saderia asked him as they padded away from there.

“There’s a bench over there,” he replied, and they headed toward it to sit together.

Saderia looked at the carpet and Dash guessed she was thinking about what he had told her it was for. She turned to him curiously, proving his guess right. “Did you go here in first grade?” she asked him.

Dash let out a silent sigh, his eyes clouding a little. “Yes,” he replied, giving no more information. Yes, he had and life had been horrible even then, even with his father alive. Actually, it had been hard *because* his father had been alive to torment him and...well it was over now, so why

dwell in the past? But he could still recall going to school when he was six and feeling relieved that he was away from his father, and not caring about the torment from the other kids about his shyness. Back then, he was scared to talk to anybody, fearing they'd be as cold as his father. He still feared talking to anybody, but for slightly different reasons now.

When he was six, he hadn't understood exactly what his father was up to and why he was doing it, or why he was tormenting him. But he had still had to take care of himself, making his own meals and such. His father had never cared enough to look after him, even ten years ago when he was just a cub. He had had other things to worry about besides Dash and only gave him what he needed to survive until Dash was old enough to take care of himself. His father didn't have to wait too long because Dash quickly picked up that, if he was going to live, he was the one that was going to have to work for it.

Snapping out of his dark memories, he just shrugged. "I've been going here for a while."

Saderia looked at him for a minute longer and then turned her eyes to the book she had checked out. Happy to have some sort of distraction, Dash looked at his own book, wondering if he could ever reveal his secret.

"Hi, Dash!"

At lunch, Saderia came to sit with him at the end of the table where they had sat before. The first part of the day had flown by quickly and now the two animals sat together in the lunchroom, ignoring glares from the L's and Grath.

He looked up from his lunch of four berries to look at Saderia and try to smile. "Hi, Saderia."

Her gaze flickered to the four tiny berries and he saw shock in her expression but she quickly composed it to hide that emotion.

"So how are you doing?" she asked pointedly, obviously trying to keep her gaze off his lunch.

"Fine," he muttered.

"Are you sure?"

“Yeah,” he growled a little defensively.

“Okay.” She paused. “So, is it hard living in the woods?” she tried to ask casually.

No harder than it was living with his father, he thought, but said, “No, it’s...fine.”

“You don’t ever get hungry?” she pressed.

Hoping for some escape, he just shrugged. “I have enough to eat.”

“It doesn’t look like it,” Saderia said quietly.

“I have more at home,” he told her.

“Well...okay. You can have some of mine, if you want.” She pushed part of her lunch cautiously toward him.

The food smelled delicious and he was tired of berries all the time, but he shook his head, not looking at the food and trying to ignore the enticing smell. He had only accepted that once; it wasn’t going to become a habit. “No thanks.”

Pulling the food back, she just shrugged. “Okay...”

Dash sighed. “Can we talk about something else?”
“Like what?”

“Um...” He paused, searching for something to take the spotlight off of himself. “What’s it like living as royalty?” he asked, grabbing the first thing that came to mind.

“Not like you’d expect,” she replied, raising an eyebrow. “They don’t act all fancy and sophisticated. Cia does sometimes, but she’s okay. Mom and Dad are really fun, even though they sometimes talk about the proph...” She trailed off suddenly, her amber eyes wide, and then quickly finished, “Anyway, we usually go out to play in the forest, and Mom and Dad give me Queen training and stuff like that.” When she finished, she looked down quickly, not meeting his gaze.

Dash stared at her with a hopefully unreadable expression, but inside he was wondering what she had been about to say and how it tied in with her life. He knew most of her story by heart, but he had never heard anything about ‘the proph,’ whatever that was. There were no other clues as to what it might be and, burning with curiosity, he tried to read Saderia’s

expression for any other clues. But there was none and he was overwhelmed with a strong sense of frustration, not used to being unfamiliar with some part of the Princess's life.

"I guess that isn't what I would expect," Dash told her carefully, though he longed to ask her what she'd been about to say. "It sounds fun, though."

Saderia looked up cautiously. "Yeah...it is fun."

"So you have Queen training?" he pressed, trying to make her less uncomfortable by passing over her slip. "What's that like?"

Saderia smiled, looking relieved to get off the last topic, and told him a little about what being Queen was about and the stuff she'd have to do. It was interesting, but the thought of controlling the whole forest seemed scary to him, as she confessed that it did to her, too. But then it was time for recess and once they raced outside, they were greeted by fresh, forest smells and began a game of hide and seek.

By the end of the day, Dash was looking forward to Sunday when he would see Saderia again. She was a lot of fun, and he had decided that she might actually give him a chance if his secret ever got out. Still...he was content to keep things the way they were. But how long would the past stay where it belonged: in the past?

Chapter Nine

Carefree

Saturday was the day Saderia had looked forward to on Friday, and she awoke excitedly, smiling at the room around her. Today she would be able to spend time with her parents out in the woods, and get to know them better, though probably not enough to make up for the ten years lost. For a moment, the thought dispirited her, but then her excitement returned and she popped out of bed. She raced down the hall into the main room where her parents were waiting for her, smiling all the way.

“Ready?” Karenisha asked her.

“Of course!” she exclaimed. “Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise,” Makero told her with a grin. “It was your Mom’s idea.”

Karenisha nodded in agreement. “We’re going to have a lot of fun, Saderia! But... that’s not all there’s going to be to this day.”

Feeling a bit uncomfortable, Saderia realized she recognized that tone. “What else?” she asked hesitantly.

“We’ll talk about that when we get there,” Makero told her gently. “Right now, we should get going.”

Her father fell into step behind Karenisha, and Saderia carefully followed them as they stepped outside. Ignoring the dirt path, Karenisha veered into the woods on the right. Once their paws hit the grassy ground, all three of them took off running through the forest, feeling comfortable as they leapt over fallen trees and bushes agilely, not slowed in the least bit. Saderia’s paw pads crushed leaves and pounded down the grass beneath her, the green blades brushing softly against her fur. Since it was winter, most of the trees were losing their leaves but in this part of the forest it still looked enchanting.

As she raced by a berry bush that was still clinging to life despite the cold, Saderia snagged her claw in one of the berries and popped it into

her mouth, able to taste a lingering tang of the sweetness it used to contain. Racing on, she couldn't help thinking about Dash and wondering if this was how he lived. But then she saw the world with a whole different perspective.

Now she realized just how cold it was and felt herself shiver, a longing for a warm home making her paws itch with worry. She felt the prickles of sharp sticks tugging at her fur and discarded branches poked irritably into her paw pads. The beauty of the forest had turned drab and depressing, just another miserable day in the frigid winter. The aftertaste of the berry was bitter with monotony and yearning for what had been eaten before. The only thing left to be glad about was the fact that he was finally away from...

Saderia's paw caught on a thick root and with a cry she stumbled forward, just barely catching herself and twisting her paw in the process. But she had better things to think about, and barely noticed her hurt paw. She snapped out of her dark thoughts as quickly as possible, not liking where she was going. An unexplainable shiver of dread passed through her from ears to tail tip, and then she froze. The thoughts that had suddenly crossed her mind hadn't been her own; in a way, she almost felt as though she had intruded somewhere she didn't belong. But in her own mind, where had such thoughts come from and what did they mean?

Unexpectedly, her parents' voices crashed through the fog in her mind as she tried to explain to herself what had just happened.

"Saderia!" Karenisha exclaimed.

"Are you okay?" Makero put in right after her. "Did you twist your paw?"

It took a moment for their questions to make sense; she had completely forgotten her paw. Then Saderia gently tugged her paw out from under the root, forgetting to wince when it burned with pain. "It's fine," she murmured. "I just tripped on a stupid root, is all."

Pulling uneasily out of the haze, she looked at her parents, seeing their worried expressions. But in addition to Karenisha's anxiety, the Queen also had a sort of knowing look to her amber gaze.

“You don’t usually get tripped up by stupid roots,” Karenisha said quietly. “Is there something on your mind?”

“I don’t know,” Saderia said honestly. “I can keep walking. I’m fine. Keep going.”

Makero looked like he didn’t believe her but Karenisha gave her a brief nod and turned to keep walking, though she kept an eye on Saderia behind her and walked more slowly.

Padding along after them, Saderia tried to think of a logical explanation for the weird things she had involuntarily thought of. For a moment, it had almost been like she was having one of her Dreams, but she hadn’t been asleep. As she walked behind her parents, she cast a glance at Karenisha, who was still looking back at her kindly. She looked away and thought about what had just happened for a long moment as they continued on. Then she thought of something that made her blink in shock, before she turned to Karenisha, hoping her mother, who knew so much about Dreams and such, might be able to explain her hunch.

“Mom?” Saderia asked tentatively.

“Yes, Saderia?” Karenisha replied as she and Makero turned around to face their daughter.

Saderia paused and then blurted out, “Have you ever felt like you could tell what others were feeling or thinking? Like...like you were seeing something through their eyes?” Shaking her head, she let out a hiss of frustration. “I can’t really explain it, but do you know what I’m talking about?”

With a knowing and caring smile, Karenisha nodded. “I do.”

Looking up in surprise, Saderia’s eyes widened. “Really? How?”

“Well, I sometimes feel like I can tell what Cia is feeling, or what Makero is feeling...or what *you* are feeling.”

“Is it a Dream sense sort of thing?” she asked curiously.

Makero seemed surprised. “What do you mean, you can tell what others are thinking or feeling, Karenisha?”

“It’s an insight and intuition kind of thing, so yes, it’s a Dream sense thing,” Karenisha told them, speaking directly to Saderia. “You don’t

have to be asleep. Sometimes, when you think about an animal that you're really close to, or that you have some sort of special bond with, and wonder what they're thinking about, you can tell what they're thinking. It's usually a rare thing, but it can be easy to do, depending on how close you are to the animal." She gave Saderia a kind smile. "Why? Was that what you were distracted by?"

"I think so," she murmured, her mind racing with thoughts and possibilities.

"How clear was it for you?" her mother pressed curiously.

"Very clear," Saderia mumbled. "Except for the last part. I was snapped out of my thoughts. Even before I hit the root, I think."

"Well, what else can one expect from the daughter of the fiftieth generation?"

Saderia's head shot up to stare at her mother, but she saw only compassion in her expression. Then she began thinking about the prophecy again and it began to make more sense, put together with the other bit of information she had just been told.

Amazed, and a bit uncomfortable, she realized that she had just been able to see exactly what Dash had been thinking and feeling. *An animal that you're really close to, or that you have some sort of special bond with...* With Karenisha's words fresh in her mind, mixed with the prophecy and thoughts of Dash, she wondered again if the dark brown lion had some part in the prophecy, as she suspected. It had been very clear—she had actually felt and tasted the things he must have—so she must have a *very* special bond with him; the thought made her smile.

But what about the last part? What had almost been revealed to her? She could guess that it had something to do with his old life from the tiny bits of information she had been able to scavenge for herself, but the exact details were unknown to her.

Still, the thought of being so close to her new friend made her feel warm with happiness. She might have someone she could talk to about her Dreams and other confusing dilemmas if Dash were part of the prophecy. Looking up at her mother and father, she smiled. "I think I'm starting to accept the prophecy. I might even like it a little."

Karenisha led them onward for a while and Saderia's paw eventually stopped hurting so much. She kept thinking about the prophecy and about her new friend who she really wanted to help and who she was practically *dying* to see again. Then she realized that she hadn't even remembered to ask her parents' permission to go play with him on Sunday, despite how she had anticipated it.

"Mom, Dad," she called.

"Yes?" Makero looked back at her, while Karenisha just flicked her ears to show she was listening as she led the way.

"Is it okay if I go play with a friend from school on Sunday?" she asked them.

"Of course," Makero replied.

"As long as you keep it within a few hours," Karenisha added, still keeping her eyes on the woods around her.

"Okay, thanks." As they continued walking, they began talking about normal things, like how she was adjusting to school, how much better it was than before, the kinds of animals she was meeting, etcetera.

"I'm still trying to get my teachers to know me," she explained. "But I'm friends with a cheetah, and also this lion who's really nice now. Of course, some of the other students aren't as friendly."

"There's some in every bunch," Makero said with a good-natured sigh, and they continued their conversation, talking about any number of things until Karenisha suddenly said, "We're here."

Stepping up to stand beside her mother, Saderia gazed out at a small clearing that stretched out in front of her. The sun above shone down on the clearing, making the remaining green leaves raise toward the light, and the green grass beneath her shimmer. Even in the winter it was a beautiful place and somewhere Saderia could hear birdsong sounding through the trees. Small, colorful flowers spotted the ground and Saderia guessed there would be more in spring.

"What is this place?" she asked them, staring around at the pretty clearing in fascination.

“Karenisha’s Dream Meadow,” Makero told her with a smile.

Saderia shot a questioning look at her mother. “Mom...?”

Karenisha let out a little laugh. “When I first found out about the Power, it was kind of confusing, so I went here to figure it out. It sort of calmed me, I guess. Whenever I needed to figure something out, I usually came here.”

“It’s pretty,” Saderia murmured, thinking of the feeling tied into this place, the place her mother had come to in the past.

“It’s a place of power for me,” Karenisha told her. “I don’t expect it to have quite the same effect on you. Everyone in the family has their unique place of power. Sometimes it’s not even a place, but with a friend, or a happy thought. But this is my place of power so I just wanted you to see it.”

“Thank you.” She smiled up at her mother. “If it’s special to you, it is to me.”

Karenisha smiled back at her, her amber eyes glistening with emotion. “That means a lot.” She paused, beaming out at the clearing. “Of course, this wasn’t the only haven for me when I was dealing with things. I had Cia. She helped me figure out Dreams, even though she doesn’t understand them, and she was there for me when I needed her the most.”

Saderia thought of her aunt and felt a glow of warmth accompanied by a pang of guilt. Now she couldn’t understand how she could have ever suspected her aunt of murdering her parents; now that she knew everything, it was the farthest possible thing from the truth, and she wished she had seen it back then. But she quickly pushed away the negative thoughts, wanting to enjoy Karenisha’s Meadow. She thought about how Karenisha had said a place of power could be with a friend...

“It’s great that you had someone to help you back then,” Saderia told her kindly, stifling a pang of sadness that she didn’t feel that way with anyone yet, not even her parents.

Karenisha nodded. “And later, when I didn’t have Cia, I had your father.” She shot a smile at Makero who grinned back at her and flicked her lightly with his tail. There was a long pause and then Karenisha turned to

Saderia with a look of understanding. “You don’t have to hide how you feel, Saderia, especially when I can tell anyway. I understand if you haven’t found anyone you feel comfortable talking to yet.”

Saderia’s fur grew hot with embarrassment and shame that she had hid that from her parents and also because of her discomfort in talking to them. “I’m sorry,” she said guiltily. “I just didn’t want you guys to be upset. I’ll probably feel more comfortable with it later.”

“You don’t have to force yourself to do that,” her mother said gently, her amber eyes glittering with love and understanding. “You’ll find someone that’s much easier to talk to, in time. Until then, we’ll do the best we can to help.”

“If you don’t want to talk to us about Dreams, then you don’t have to,” Makero agreed. “But if you have a question or if you’re afraid, we want to know.”

“Mom can already tell,” Saderia said sheepishly, grinning at the Queen.

Karenisha grinned back at her and then turned away to stare out across the clearing, her expression turning serious. “I know you’re scared of it, but you should think about the prophecy,” she said softly.

Saderia looked out at the meadow too, staying silent for a moment. “I know,” she said at last. “And like I said before, now that I’m starting to understand it more, I’m kind of starting to like it. Kind of. I’m still scared about some parts...I don’t know if I can save the world, like it wants.”

Makero let out a laugh from behind them and came to stand beside his daughter. “You don’t have to save the world, Saderia.”

“Try as you might,” Karenisha added, her eyes twinkling.

Makero’s green eyes glittered with amusement. “She’s right, you know. From what we’ve seen, you do try to save everyone.”

Saderia looked down at her paws. “Sorry, I just want to help everyone.”

“Don’t apologize. It’s a tough burden, but also a good one. You’ll get far in life,” Karenisha told her.

“You just have to be careful,” Makero added.

Smiling, Saderia nodded at her parents and stepped into the sunlit meadow with Karenisha and Makero right behind her. Saderia plopped down onto the soft ground and rolled over to lay on her back, squinting up at the sky while trying to block the sunlight from her shimmering amber eyes.

“I just don’t know why the prophecy chose *me*,” Saderia confided, staring up at the calm, blue sky.

“We keep telling you, you’re more special than you think,” Makero told her gently.

“Your father’s right. You *are* the daughter of the fiftieth generation of the royal family, with the strongest Dream sense any of us has ever heard of. More than that, you’ve got a heart of gold and a great attitude. The prophecy and Queen Tarae chose you, Saderia, because they believe in you. You’re capable of great things.” Karenisha smiled at her and flicked her with her fluffy tail.

Saderia said nothing and continued staring up at the sky. Was that really true? If it was, could she actually fulfill the lifelong prophecy?

Karenisha rolled her eyes playfully, letting out a little knowing laugh. “You’ll find out someday.”

Saderia was walking through a dark forest, feeling scared but suddenly confident when she felt the touch of warm fur brush beside her. Looking down, she saw brown paws walking next to hers, matching her step for step and never wavering. Something startled her and her fur instinctively bristled in fear, but then she felt something light rest on her back, calming her. She looked behind her to see a dark brown tail with a darker brown tuft at the end.

Suddenly she was in Queen Tarae’s tomb again, staring at a glowing, old piece of paper and feeling power accompanied by fear and wonder surging through her body, into her limbs, to every hair on her back. Confusion clouded her mind. Why had the prophecy chosen her? How could she figure out and deal with the Dreams? How could she ever live up to the prophecy’s expectations? Drowning in terror and uncertainty, she felt

helpless...until something soft and warm reassuringly brushed her side. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw dark brown fur.

She looked up, and stared directly into Dash's face.

Dash's amber eyes looked directly into hers, kind, comforting and reassuring in every way. He smiled encouragingly, and confidence and hope swelled inside her until it drowned out the fear. Dash gave her a caring look and in her mind, she practically heard him say that he'd stick by her through anything. The scene darkened until only Dash's amber eyes were left, still staring into hers. They were still kind, but now they were pleading.

They were the last thing Saderia saw before she struggled awake in her blue bed, blinking sleep from her eyes, and casting her wide amber gaze around the room in surprise, knowing that she had just had another Dream.

It was Sunday, and Saderia's paws were a bit tired from the trek through the woods yesterday, and then running around and playing with her parents in the meadow, but the tiredness was overcome by enthusiasm. Today was the day she had planned to meet Dash.

Dash!

The Dream she had just had flashed through her mind once more. For this Dream, the meaning, for once, was actually clear when she thought about it. Upon delving deeper into the Dream, she smiled as she read the meaning.

In the Dream, she had been scared when she'd had to face a dark situation, but Dash had been there, urging her on. It didn't get any clearer than that. The meaning was that Dash would obviously stick by her through anything. In the Dream, he had seemed a lot calmer and more at ease so she guessed that they would become even better friends later on, feeling her heart soar at the realization.

But at the end of her Dream, she had seen Dash beside her, calming her and reassuring her *in Queen Tarae's tomb*. She was temporarily aghast due to the secrecy that had been instilled in her regarding that tomb. The Dreams were a highly-protected royal family secret, and no one was allowed in the tomb. It could be just symbolism that he would be there for her through anything, but something inside Saderia told her it was something more. She remembered thinking about needing someone to

confide her Dreams to, and help her figure them out. Could that someone be Dash? Would Dash understand the significance of the Power and the need for secrecy and help her deal with the prophecy? Would he help her with her Dreams, and whatever else came her way?

Her grin lit up the dark room as she thought of those possibilities with her new best friend. Dash *was* her best friend now...or he would be soon.

But then she frowned, thinking about the end, where she had seen only Dash's eyes, right after the scene in Queen Tarae's tomb. There was something daunting about seeing his amber eyes down in the tomb, but she couldn't quite put her paw on it. Hesitantly pushing that eerie thought out of her mind, she wondered about the emotion in Dash's eyes. It was as if he were pleading for something, but what?

Forgiveness! The thought popped into her mind almost the second she questioned it. But that made no sense; what would she need to forgive him for? He had never done anything bad to her or done anything that would require her to forgive him. On top of her confusion, dread and anxiety suddenly settled over her like a dark blanket. Could there be something that she had no way of knowing about yet? Something bad? She didn't have a clue as to what it might be, and there were no hints from the Dreams she'd had, even though they were supposed to help, so she dropped it.

Sighing, she stepped out of bed, letting herself get excited again at the thought of seeing Dash, especially after the Dream. Leaving her room, Saderia found her parents eating breakfast at the gold dining table and sat down with them to eat a quick meal.

“So you’re going to play with your friend today?” Karenisha said between bites.

Saderia nodded eagerly. “I’ll be back in a few hours, don’t worry.”

“We won’t worry,” Makero replied, though she saw a quick shadow flit across his face. She knew they were wary about letting her go anywhere alone after what Dastarius had done, but they also wanted her to have her freedom so they didn’t object.

“I won’t be long,” she promised. “I’ll tell you about it when I get back.” She paused, then turned to Karenisha. “By the way, Mom. I have a question about Dreams.”

Turning serious, Karenisha turned to her with a caring expression. “Such as?”

“Well, do Dreams always predict the future, or do they do other things, too?”

“They usually warn you about the future, but they can use images from the past if it has something to do with what’s to come,” she explained. “Does that help?”

It did help her understand them a little better, but in this case that wasn’t what she needed to know. “But do they, like...maybe answer some question you might have?”

“Only if it’s very important, and the Dreams don’t usually give you the direct answer. If they do, there’s probably more to it.”

“I’m so confused,” Cia commented from across the table, resting her head on her paw.

Uncle Jash shook his head and turned to Makero. “How did you ever get used to this weirdness?”

Makero just shrugged, grinning, then turned to Saderia. “Do you need to talk about it?”

Saderia shook her head. “No, I have this one figured out. I was just wondering because it seemed weird.”

“We’re glad to help,” Karenisha told her, looking at her proudly.

Saderia turned back to her cereal and finished it with her family.

“Have fun,” Makero said cheerily as Saderia jumped to the floor. “You know where to go, right? You don’t need us to help you find this place?”

The King and Queen had a big book of addresses and stuff like that, but Dash had told her he’d take her there. “That’s okay. I know where to go. I’ll see you guys later.”

With her Dream still fresh in her mind, she stepped outside and bounded down the dirt path, eager to meet her future best friend.

After clearing away anything that might give Saderia the slightest hint of the past, Dash found himself looking forward to her visit. It seemed like such a normal thing for friends to visit each other, and he finally *did* have a friend! But he still couldn't shake a feeling of apprehension when he wondered if she would actually show up. If she didn't, that could mean the King and Queen had figured out his secret...or Saderia just didn't want to be friends anymore. It was definitely strange that both options seemed equally horrifying to Dash now, when one was clearly more life-threatening.

He padded over to wait in front of the empty school for Saderia to show up so he could take her to the woods. For the moment, it didn't matter anymore that he had the woods instead of a house. Saderia was a great friend and he couldn't stop the good feeling he got about her, which was a good thing as far as he was concerned.

Moments later, he spotted Saderia emerge from the woods around the school and smiled when she saw him.

"Hi, Dash," Saderia exclaimed when she bounded over to him, her amber eyes glowing. "Ready to go?"

He was so happy to see her that he almost forgot to feel relieved that she *was* here, meaning Queen Karenisha and King Makero hadn't guessed his secret. Well, maybe... "You came!" he exclaimed, happily.

"Of course I did. I told you my parents wouldn't have a problem with it and I was glad to come," Saderia told him. Flicking her fluffy tail excitedly, she smiled as her Dream came back to her, seeing the happy look in Dash's amber eyes.

"That's great." Feeling better than he had in days...in *years*, Dash flicked his tail toward the woods. "It's this way." As he stepped into the woods with Saderia right behind him, it seemed like a huge, painful weight had finally been lifted from his shoulders. He grinned and leapt eagerly over the roots in the path. For a moment, he wondered if it could be this

way forever, if he could go out exploring in the woods, or anywhere, with Saderia padding beside him.

He caught a quick glimpse of a wonderful, exciting and better future being friends with Saderia. But something got in the way of that great visual: the past and his little secret. A little dispirited, his head drooped a little but he perked up when Saderia flicked him playfully with her tail and fell into step beside him.

“My family’s really cool,” Saderia said, making conversation. “They’re not like any other family, I don’t think, and not just because they’re royalty.”

“Really? Why?” This time Dash was really interested and excited, not feeling *that* uncomfortable when the subject of the King and Queen came up.

“Well...” Saderia wanted to tell him about the prophecy, the Dreams, the past and everything else, especially since her Dreams seemed to approve—maybe even recommend—but she held back, knowing it was probably too soon. “Magical is probably the best word for them. There’s more to the royal family than just controlling the forest, but I don’t think most animals know about it.” She paused. “Well, they aren’t *supposed* to know about it. It’s sort of a royal family secret.”

Dash blinked, feeling his fur stand on end. *The royal family secret...* He had heard that many times before and he had gathered enough information to know the gist of it. But there was no way he was telling Saderia he knew such a momentous secret. He didn’t want to know anyway. To him, life seemed like it would be much easier if he didn’t know so much. “Secret?” he said, feigning ignorance. “I didn’t know the royal family had anything like that.”

Another lie? Jeez, he was getting as bad as his father with this.

But as soon as he had the thought, his eyes widened and he nearly froze to the spot with horror. He could *never* be anything like his father! The only thing that kept him going sometimes was hope that he was nothing like his father, but he always feared that it wasn’t true. His father had told him over and over that he was a loser because he was nothing like him, but who was to say he couldn’t become like him later on? No, he would never

let himself act like that, he told himself firmly, pushing the thoughts to the back of his mind as far as they would go.

Just to prove that wouldn't happen, he said, "Well, actually I kind of heard something about it, but I don't know the details." That wasn't technically a lie, and there was no law that said he had to tell her exactly *where* he had gotten the information he had, and just how much he *did* know.

Saderia hesitated, wondering if she should tell him just the basics of the secret now. The decision was suddenly nerve-wracking; if she chose to do it, it could very well be a huge mistake later. The Dreams were a huge royal family secret and she wasn't supposed to tell just anybody she wanted. But her instincts were telling her that to tell him was all right. She was supposed to follow her instincts and yet she knew the consequences of revealing the secret. But maybe, as long as she didn't tell him *everything*, it would be fine, and she could save the rest of her story for later, since she wasn't comfortable with talking about it yet. Her intuition *did* give her a clear warning about that. But she would hold off until they got to Dash's woods at least.

"I'll tell you about it when we get to your woods," she told him, jumping a little in nervous excitement. "Where is it? I can't wait to get there!"

"It's not very impressive, it's just the woods," he said uncertainly, but her enthusiasm was catchy and he found himself smiling back at her.

"But it's *your* woods," she pointed out. "And we can have fun there together."

Your woods. As if, because he lived there, it actually had value...as if he actually had value in someone's eyes. Dash blinked his eyes, trying to keep his emotions from spilling out and smiled at her. He raced off in the direction of his clearing with Saderia racing right beside him. He knew the way by heart and it was almost a straight line from the school, even though it was a bit deep in the woods. Together, the two of them raced across the winter forest, tearing through soft shrubs, and feeling the remaining blades of grass soft against their paws. More of the trees were bare in this part of the woods, Saderia noticed, but it was still pretty, to her, at least. To Dash,

though, she guessed it was the same old, depressing place, as she had realized in her brief moment of seeing through his eyes.

Suddenly Saderia looked down and noticed their paws, orange and dark brown, were moving at the same pace, never missing a beat, just like in her Dream. Smiling to herself, she realized that it was coming true and that Dash was a good friend that she could talk to. But then an unexpected wave of dread, almost fear, flooded over her. Dash's paws... Why did Dash's dark brown paws look so familiar? She had known him for a while, but it seemed as if there was something else she should be recognizing. The longer she stared, the more uneasy she felt until she had to look away. The feeling itself wasn't actually a warning, more like some sort of hint that she couldn't understand. But the feeling it inspired was making her very nervous, maybe even afraid.

“We’re here.”

Dash's soft voice made the premonition disappear and she looked up to see where they had come. She managed to smile around at the place. There was a small, grassy clearing, covered by a bare canopy of trees hanging overhead. There was a flattened grassy spot between two trees that she guessed was Dash's sleeping place, and she noticed a few of his belongings sitting inside some of the knotholes in trees or covered by a shrub that was losing its leaves.

“Well, this is my home.”

Saderia noticed how sad Dash's voice had gotten and she gave him a compassionate flick with her tail. “It's a great place! I always like to explore in the woods, and this place is cool!”

Try living here for a while and then see if it's so great, Dash thought darkly, but he tried to get more excited since Saderia was obviously attempting to cheer him up.

“We can have tree-climbing contests,” Saderia went on, padding into the clearing. “And races and stuff like that. Maybe even hide and seek; this place isn't *that* bare.”

“Maybe,” he agreed, stepping into his clearing after her and looking around. He was surprised to find that, with Saderia around, the place somehow seemed a little brighter and a lot less bleak.

Saderia paused, then said, “But first, do you want to hear about the secret?”

Dash froze for a moment, then said carefully, “If it’s okay...”

“I think it is. Mom always tells me to trust my instinct and you’ll get why in a second. But if I tell you, you have to promise never to tell *anyone*. It’s the most important secret the royal family has, I think.”

“I promise,” Dash said, meaning it. Who would he tell anyway?

“And it might sound crazy, but it’s true and you’re going to have to trust me and believe me. It’s sort of magical and hard to believe, but I am telling the truth.”

“I trust you.” He had heard much crazier things than what he knew he was about to hear.

“Okay, I trust you, too.” The moment had come; but what she’d said was true: she did trust him. She took a deep breath and began telling him about the royal family secret. She told him that an ancient scroll in an ancient tomb—not telling what tomb, where it was and how to get inside—gave an animal the power to see the future in Dreams. She told him about how she did sometimes see the future, and how it also helped her answer questions, including the one about him but not going into too much detail about it. She went on to describe how she also had an instinct inside her that helped guide her to do what was right. She talked about what the scroll had said about her being the daughter of the fiftieth generation, and the huge prophecy she would have to deal with for her whole life. She finished by describing what Karenisha had told her about it, and admitting that she was still a little afraid of it.

“A prophecy?” Dash asked when she said the last part. He had listened attentively through the whole story even though he knew the basics of it all. She gave much more detail which made it easier to understand. But he had never heard anything about this prophecy thing. He thought back to what Saderia had almost said on Friday and realized she had almost said ‘the prophecy.’

What she had said about the prophecy was amazing and he had never guessed anything like that had happened in the tomb. But when he thought about it, Saderia seemed like the perfect animal for the prophecy to

choose, considering how brave she was. It was strange, though, that she didn't seem to see it that way.

"Yeah," she said, bringing him back into the conversation. She looked down. "To be honest, I don't think I can fulfill the prophecy. I'm scared of it."

He blinked in surprise. "Why wouldn't you be able to? You can do everything."

She raised an eyebrow. "Not hardly."

Dash bit his lip to keep from telling her of the amazing things she had done in the past, reminding himself that he shouldn't know any of that. Instead he told her, "I think you can do this. You just seem really brave and strong, and persistent. No other animal but you would be able to do it."

Saderia blinked. "You really think I can do it?"

"Of course!" He paused. "You know, you can talk to me about it if you want. I don't understand this Dream stuff as much, but I'll help you however I can."

Her Dream came rushing back to her and she felt the corners of her mouth turn up in a brilliant grin. It was true! Dash was part of the prophecy! But should she tell him? "Dash," she said hesitantly, "this might sound kind of weird but...I think you're part of the prophecy, too."

His amber eyes widened in surprise. "Me? Why would I have anything to do with the prophecy?" Even as he said it, his mind reached back into the past to the things he had done and the things that had happened. Could it be true? Why would some ancient royal family prophecy pick him to help Saderia out? Okay, he was the last animal that should be picked. He probably shouldn't even be anywhere around Saderia in the first place.

Saderia shrugged. "Why *me*? I don't know, but it just seems that way." She hesitated. "I'm not crazy, you know."

"I know. I believe you about the Dreams and stuff," Dash told her absently. He was beginning to panic now at the mention of anything having to do with the past. His old paranoia of being found out simply refused to go away. He knew how horrible it would be when she learned his secret.

How could he put it off? And in the meantime, how could he stand the constant fear? It was clear what needed to be done, and he'd put it off for way too long. But doing it was so painful... "Saderia," he began, taking a deep breath. He was unable to meet her gaze. "Maybe...maybe we shouldn't...be friends..."

No! Saderia felt her body grow cold with alarm and the start of deep grief, as if she were about to lose something dear to her. "What?! No, we should! I'm sorry for bringing up the Dream stuff..."

"It's not that." It was something much worse. "I just..." He looked up and, seeing the look in her eye, couldn't do it. He shook his head, looking back down. "Never mind, I want to be friends. I just..." He was seriously running out of lies and he really wished he could stop lying. Maybe he should just tell her, maybe she'd understand. She seemed like the kind of good-natured animal that might be able to understand if he just told her what his big secret was and got it out of the way.

"Actually, Saderia," he began, staring at his paws again. His tail flicked over the ground nervously and he sheathed and unsheathed his claws, kneading them into the ground. A cold sweat broke out on his brow as goose bumps shivered up his body. "If we're going to be friends...there's something I need to tell you. Something...bad."

Saderia tipped her head questioningly to one side. In her mind, she saw a scene from her Dream: of Dash's amber eyes pleading for forgiveness at the end. Was she about to find out what that had been about? His nervousness and fear was glaringly obvious but it made her heart ache to see him so vulnerable. In a weak attempt to cheer him up, she gave him a reassuring smile.

"I..." Dash looked up and cut off mid-sentence when he saw the kind look in her eyes. He couldn't risk losing that. There was no way he could tell Princess Saderia *anything* about his dangerous past. Swallowing uncomfortably, he flicked his eyes to the ground and mumbled, "I just...feel bad about bringing you here, to the woods. You must be used to much better places." It was the first thing he could think of but he still hated lying. And what a pathetic lie it was.

Although Saderia could tell that that wasn't all there was, she just nodded and smiled. "No, it's fine. Don't worry. I like the woods."

"Right," he muttered, feeling horrible.

Saderia stifled a pang of sadness that he was probably hiding something from her. She wanted them to be best friends who shared everything, but they had only just become friends so she would probably have to give it some time. "Come on," she said. "Let's have some fun. I bet I can climb that tree over there faster than you."

Dash looked up and tried to smile to keep Saderia's enthusiasm. "We'll see," he retorted.

"Well, what are we standing around for? On the count of three, start climbing and whoever gets to the top limb the fastest wins!"

Trying to push away his anger at himself, Dash followed her over to one of the trees and on the count of three jumped up and latched his claws into the bark, pushing his way up alongside her. Saderia won, of course, but only by a little and Dash soon sat on the branch beside her, staring out at the woods.

"If you need help figuring out these 'Dreams,' I'll help, if you want," Dash told her, trying to make up for his lack of truthfulness, but also meaning it.

"Thanks," Saderia said, smiling as she realized the Dream had been right. "Are you okay with the prophecy thing, too?"

He nodded. "I don't mind if I get to help you out. Do you mind?" he asked quickly, suddenly nervous.

She shook her head. "Not at all. It'll be great if I have someone to help me out with the prophecy." She paused then her eyes shone. "And I *do* like adventures, so maybe this prophecy thing won't be so bad after all."

Dash glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, seeing her amber eyes sparkle as she looked out at the winter forest. It might be a futile hope, but if this prophecy thing included him, then maybe there wouldn't be any problems. Maybe he wouldn't have to worry about Saderia turning on him because of the past.

“I like adventures,” he said, turning to look at her, adding in his head, *As long as we’re together.*

Saderia smiled at him with her eyes and then turned to gaze out at the forest. “As long as we’re together,” she replied, gazing out over the forest with shining eyes.

Dash blinked at hearing his own words repeated, then felt a warm feeling spread over him. Smiling a real smile, something he hadn’t done often, he gazed out at the forest beside Saderia, their tails twining together. *Together...*

Chapter Ten

Bye-Bye Bias

“Saderia! Guess what! I—”

Dash was cut off by a booming voice from down the hall. “Princess Saderia, report to my office at once!”

Both animals turned toward the sound and saw Mr. Delaca standing at the front of the atrium. Saderia’s heart sank. It was Thursday of the next week, right before they were about to go to lunch, and she and Dash had become even better friends. Saderia helped Dash understand what was being taught since she had learned it long before, and she’d helped him study for the test that day, so all had been going well. Dash had even stopped acting so nervous and jumpy around her; they were on their way to becoming best friends. In the wake of all that happiness, Saderia had forgotten all about Lolista’s warning the Friday before, that Mr. Delaca would want to talk to her sometime that week. And as far as she knew, everyone still did think of her as ‘Hurricane Princess.’

Dash’s excitement faded at the sight of the principal standing there, and calling Saderia in that cold voice. What had she done to get called to the office? He didn’t want her to get in trouble! Saderia looking downcast now, too, and more than a little unwilling to follow the panther.

“Want me to come with you?” he whispered to her. “I might be able to get him to, well, cool off.”

Saderia shook her head although she was grateful for Dash’s concern. “No, that’s okay.”

Dash hesitated, not wanting to leave her alone to get yelled at for no reason, then just sighed. “All right. I’ll wait for you at lunch...Good luck.”

“Thanks.” She began to pad toward the panther, her fluffy tail dragging across the floor. When she reached him, she muttered, “I’m here, let’s go,” avoiding his glare.

Without another word, he stalked off toward his office and Saderia trailed behind him, casting Dash one last unhappy look.

They reached the office door and followed the hallway down to the principal's office. Mr. Delaca went to his desk while Saderia sat in the chair in front of it, studying her paws and waiting for the tirade to come.

“Your grades are...good,” Mr. Delaca began in a cold voice. “And so far you've gotten along with most of the animals, trying to fit in with the others like you're normal.”

Saderia's ears pricked. Maybe he was starting to understand and this wouldn't be so horrible after all. She looked up with a hopeful expression, only to be crushed by his next words.

“How long are you going to keep up this charade?” he hissed. “How long are you going to try to impress the King and Queen, or whatever you're trying to do? We're not falling for it, and we're all waiting for you to stop this game.”

Saderia narrowed her eyes. “It's not a game! And in answer to your question of how long I'm going to keep it up: forever! Because that's who I am.”

“Don't think you can talk back to me just because you're a Princess!” he snapped. “You think you're so much better than everyone!”

“No, I don't!” she interrupted, adding in a quieter voice, “If you'd just give me a chance, and maybe let me explain, you wouldn't hate me so much.”

The panther glared at her but otherwise stayed silent; Saderia took that as her cue to explain.

Taking a deep breath, she began, “Look. I'm not like you think, and I'm kind of sensitive about others judging me as a prissy Princess. It's just not me.”

“Who do you think you're fooling?” Mr. Delaca growled and Saderia sat back, waiting for him to finish.

“Can I just talk for a minute?” she asked carefully.

The principal growled but nodded with a roll of his eyes.

Saderia paused, and then decided that there might be one way to get the point across to him. “Can I tell you a story?” she began softly.

He frowned in confusion. “What?”

“Just let me speak.” She sighed and then began, “Once upon a time there was a tiger Princess named Saderia who everyone thought had everything. But she didn’t have everything. She was missing a lot, the biggest thing being this: parents.” She paused to look Mr. Delaca in the eye as she went on, “For ten years, this was my life. My aunt and uncle tried to get me to be a ‘proper Princess’ by acting all prissy and stuff, but I hated it since it just wasn’t me. I missed my parents all the time, who were supposedly killed in the catastrophic 1996 fire. I never got to explore or have any fun, and so I passed the time reading and learning new things from textbooks and stuff.

“Reading was my favorite thing to do and it still is, and I always love learning new things. Without going into too many details, I have my parents back now, but they don’t treat me like, well, like a Princess. Mom gives me Queen training and, basically, it’s that I have to make hard decisions for situations she sets up. They give me free choice to make smart decisions, and learning is very important in my family. I’ve never had a friend before since Cia tried to teach me that ‘the rest of the forest is beneath me’ which I never bought, but now I have Dash and Loki.” She sighed. “All I want to do is fit in and be treated like everyone else and if you and the teachers don’t believe that...oh well, I guess.”

Mr. Delaca was silent for a long moment and then he finally asked, “All of that is true?”

She shrugged. “Of course. I’ve been trying to think of some way to show everyone who I really am, but so far I don’t have any ideas. The best thing I could think of was to tell a little bit about the past.”

There was a long pause and then Mr. Delaca looked away. “I didn’t know all of that.”

“Usually I prefer it that way, but in this case...” Saderia looked down. “Like I said, I just want to fit in and have fun with my new best friend.”

Another pause and then Mr. Delaca quietly told her, “Go back to class, or lunch, I guess it is. Sorry for interrupting your day.”

“It’s all right,” Saderia replied, getting up from her chair and walking carefully out the door, where she nearly ran right into Lolista. The lioness didn’t look happy.

“Um...hi,” Saderia stammered, trying to ignore her ice blue glare.

“Get away from me, Princess,” she snapped, trying to shove past her.

Saderia stopped her and frowned. “What’s your problem with me again?”

“I said get out of my way,” she hissed.

Saderia stepped back to give her space to leave but when Lolista started to stalk away, she whirled around and demanded, “Why are you and that lion so close?”

“Me and Dash?” Saderia asked, startled.

“*Dash!*” Lolista mimicked bitterly. She rolled her eyes and started storming away again, muttering something like, “I need a plan since those two freaks obviously aren’t cooperating.”

Saderia frowned, feeling very uncomfortable. She was suddenly overcome by an instinctual feeling of dread. But her kindness overrode the feeling and she called out, “Lolista? Do you need help with something?”

Still walking away, the lioness let out an angry, humorless laugh. “Somehow I doubt you’d be willing to ‘help’ with what I have in mind.” Then she stalked out of the hallway, her yellow tail twitching in annoyance.

Saderia stared after her for a moment and then, when she had disappeared around a corner, began to pad after her, out of the office, blinking slowly. The lioness was nowhere in sight. “Some animals are just strange,” she murmured to herself, although her fur still prickled when she thought about her. For the first time, she wondered why Lolista seemed to be so interested in her friend Dash. Then she remembered she had better hurry if she wanted to get to lunch on time and started walking more quickly, the thought disappearing from her mind.

“So, what was the good news?” Saderia asked, making herself more cheery as she settled into the seat beside Dash once she reached the lunchroom.

Dash was glad to see her, especially since she seemed happy after what had happened. He turned to her with a concerned expression. “Never mind that. How’d it go with Mr. Delaca?”

“Yeah, how’d it go?”

Saderia and Dash looked up to see Loki standing above them. She slid into the seat next to Dash, although she had left her lunch tray in her normal spot. “The L’s are spreading it all around that you got sent to the principal’s office and I decided I might as well be a vulture for once and see if you’re all right.”

Saderia gave her a grateful look. “Thanks, Loki. You too, Dash.”

“Yeah, he helped me tell the others to shut up,” Loki agreed, grinning at Dash. “That was nice work.”

Dash grinned back. “I’ve wanted to do that for a while now, actually.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Dash laughed but then turned to Saderia, still concerned. “So, did he yell at you?”

“Well, a little,” Saderia admitted. “And he thinks I’m just trying to fool everyone, which is really stupid.”

“Ignorant animals get on my nerves, too,” Loki agreed, with a mocking glance at Grath.

“Yeah, but I told him a little bit about my past, like how I used to read and stuff like that, and I actually think he’s starting to get it.”

Dash smiled. “That’s great!”

“Well, let’s have a round of applause for that,” Loki agreed. “Now maybe we can work on getting that through the L’s thick heads.”

“We heard that Loki!” Lizzie snapped, stomping over to them with the ever-present Lily and Lisa right behind her.

Loki rolled her eyes at them. “Truth hurt, Lizzie?”

Saderia sighed. "Hi, Lizzie. How are you? Nice weather we're having, huh? What'd you get on that test on—"

"What'd the principal want?" Lizzie sneered, cutting off her attempt at being friendly.

Saderia sighed, while Loki hissed, "Does anyone wonder why I call them vultures?"

"It went great," Saderia said then, smiling widely. "Mr. Delaca just wanted to tell me how well I'm getting along with everyone and how well I'm doing in school. Thanks so much for asking!"

As she had guessed, that threw her off. "Wait, what? He..." Lizzie faltered, then gave her a somewhat sarcastic smile. "That's just great, Saderia."

Saderia noticed Ms. Spot hovering just a few paces away from them, explaining Lizzie's sudden change of mood. Saderia gave her a big, fake smile. "Thanks! That was so thoughtful, Lizzie!"

"Yes, well...we try our best," Lizzie replied, giving her a look that seemed like one a spider might make before it drained the life out of its prey.

The three turned around and stalked back to their seats then, leaving Saderia and her friends sitting there. Saderia just grinned at Loki and Dash and rolled her eyes while Loki started laughing.

"Well, good to know you got out alive," Loki said finally, getting up. "I'll leave you two to eat now." Waving goodbye, she walked away, leaving Saderia and Dash sitting at the end of the table in their usual spot.

"So, what was your good news after all that?" Saderia asked, turning to him.

"Oh yeah." He grinned. "I got an A on my math test!"

"That's great!" Saderia exclaimed, feeling even happier since she had helped him study.

Dash just smiled, finally feeling like he was actually getting somewhere. For once, he actually felt proud of something he had done. Perhaps he *could* have a better life than before.

“I haven’t gotten my test back yet,” Saderia admitted. “Ms. Spot said she has it and she wants to talk to me about it or something.”

“I hope that’s a good thing, not a bad thing,” Dash replied.

Saderia nodded. “Me too.”

At recess they played hide and seek again, but when the game dissolved into tag, Loki came over, wanting to play.

“That’s not fair!” Dash protested good-naturedly. “You’d catch us in about one second!”

“And we’d never catch you!” Saderia agreed.

Loki laughed. “So true! But I’ll go easy on you guys, okay?”

Saderia rolled her eyes with an enthusiastic smile. “All right, Loki. But keep it under 70 miles per hour, please.”

“I won’t even go over 30,” Loki promised in mock solemnity.

Letting out a little laugh, Saderia agreed, “Fine. But we’ll find a way to make sure of that.”

Loki was about to reply, but suddenly Ms. Spot walked over to them and interrupted. “Saderia, I want to talk to you for a moment.” Her voice was strangely cautious and a little embarrassed as well, but Saderia followed her anyway with a shrug, telling her friends to play without her for a minute.

“What is it, Ms. Spot?” she asked when the leopard teacher had led her a little way away from the playground.

Ms. Spot seemed very uncomfortable. “Your friend, Dash, tells me that you’re...well, kind of upset about being judged because you’re a Princess.” She looked up. “He said you’re not what we think, and that you like learning and adventures and things like that. He also told me that you just want to fit in and not get any special treatment.” She shuffled her paws. “And I believe him, because you *have* been trying to do that, haven’t you? So...I’m sorry for judging you, Saderia.”

Saderia blinked in surprise. “Um...it’s all right, Ms. Spot. I’m just glad you understand now.”

“I really am sorry, Saderia. I know he was right because of your excellent grades and the way you have been doing your best to fit in and get along with others. You’ve done a great job already. And the test you took today is an A.”

“Wow, thanks, Ms. Spot!”

“Thank your friend Dash, too,” she said, smiling weakly. “Can you forgive me for jumping to conclusions too quickly?”

“Of course! You’re a great teacher.”

“I apologize for testing you at first,” she went on. “I shouldn’t have put so much pressure on you.”

“It’s all right. I didn’t mind the challenge.”

She made a sound of approval then flicked her spotted tail toward Dash and Loki. “You can go play with your friends now.”

“Thanks, Ms. Spot!” Saderia said, and then raced off toward Dash, beaming at him when she reached him, remembering that Ms. Spot had said he’d put in a good word for her. “Thanks so much, Dash! You’re the best!” she exclaimed.

Dash glanced at Ms. Spot and guessed what she was talking about. Then he smiled to himself. No one had ever said anything so nice about him.

Loki grinned at both of them. “Let’s celebrate!” She tapped Saderia with her tail. “You’re it!”

“Hey!” Saderia protested as Loki raced off. Dash laughed and bolted away from her, while Saderia rolled her eyes, smiling, and charged after Dash.

“You’re it!” she proclaimed as she leapt in front of Dash and flicked him with her tail, darting off in an instant.

Dash grinned and raced after Loki, who was closer, but soon the cheetah nearly ran into Saderia and the two of them joined forces to evade him. In the end he found himself chasing after Saderia, smiling even bigger as he realized that he and Saderia really could be best friends.

The next day, Friday, Saderia walked up the steps to the door of the school, but when she entered the front atrium, she heard her name called and turned to see Mr. Delaca standing in front of the door to the office. Trying to seem friendly, she hurried over to the panther and said in her nicest voice, “Yes, Mr. Delaca?”

He seemed uncomfortable, like Ms. Spot had, but he flicked his tail toward the door, a signal she should go with him. She followed him calmly to his office and sat before him with a kind expression.

The panther principal sighed and looked down. “What you said yesterday...I guess I judged you too quickly. I’ve spoken to your teachers about your performance and your grades and they say you’re exceptional...” He sighed, looking extremely awkward. “Anyway, I’m sorry for judging you too quickly, Princess...”

“Just Saderia, please.”

“Right, Saderia. Can you accept my apology?”

She beamed. “Of course!”

He looked up and smiled faintly. “Good. I expect you to keep up the good work. You may go back to class now. Oh, wait. You’ve shown that you understand a lot that’s being taught already, so I’ve talked to Ms. Spot to make sure you’re a little more challenged. Is that okay?”

“That’s great! Thanks,” Saderia said. “And thanks for understanding.”

“I shouldn’t have judged you,” he said sheepishly. “I apologize, and not just because your parents are the King and Queen.”

“Apology accepted,” Saderia replied, adding, “And not just because you’re the principal.”

Mr. Delaca smiled. “You may go to class now.”

Saderia smiled then walked out of the principal’s office, found her hall and entered her classroom to sit in her normal spot beside Loki.

“What’s the hold-up?” the cheetah asked, since Saderia had just barely missed being late.

“Mr. Delaca wanted to talk to me,” Saderia whispered back.

“Good news or bad news?”

“Good, he finally doesn’t think of me as a Princess.” She beamed.
“Everyone’s finally seeing me as me!”

“That’s great!” Loki grinned. “I’m sure Dash will be excited about it, too!”

Saderia agreed and looked around, searching for Dash in his normal seat in the back of the room, but, to her surprise, he wasn’t there, even though everyone else was already present. She frowned and turned back to Loki. “Where is he?”

Loki shrugged. “He’s late sometimes. He’ll probably show up soon, or we’ll see him Monday.”

It was then that Ms. Spot walked over to close the door and then began class by taking attendance.

“Dash,” she said after calling Saderia, Loki, the L’s and a few other names. She looked up when there was no answer, then marked him absent. Saderia was beginning to worry and she leaned over to Loki to whisper, “You said he’s late sometimes. How come?”

Loki shrugged with a sad expression. “It’s not my place to say,” she replied.

“I can tell you why the loser is late.”

Saderia turned around to see that it was Lizzie who had hissed at her. She hesitated, unwilling to trust anything she said, but before she could give in and take whatever answer she’d get, Loki hissed angrily, “Stay out of it, Lizzie! It’s not your place either! She can talk to him when he gets here!”

“Well, aren’t you such a goody-goody, Loki?” Lizzie snapped.
“Why not just tell her the truth? It’s not like she doesn’t already know, and it’s not too hard to figure out.”

“Dash’s business is his business, not ours,” she shot back. “Just back off.”

Lizzie muttered something too low for Saderia to hear and turned away.

“I guarantee he’ll be here soon,” Loki assured Saderia, turning to listen to Ms. Spot as she began her teaching. As the first part of the day went by, Saderia realized how much she missed Dash now, and how much she missed him when she had to go home. The only place they could meet was at school and she wished they could play afterwards. Maybe he could come over to her house sometime; friends did that, right? Or if he didn’t want to, she could go back to his woods once in a while.

The minutes ticked by; she felt strangely empty when Dash wasn’t around. About halfway through the first thirty minutes of class, Ms. Spot stopped with a sigh and announced that they would be moving some seats around. Saderia cast a glance at the L’s, who were still giggling as they had been throughout Ms. Spot’s introduction, and guessed they were the reason why.

Ms. Spot moved Lizzie to one side of the room, Lily to another, and Lisa to the back. She also moved Grath away from Loki’s seat, putting him in front where she could keep an eye on him. Then she made an empty desk next to Saderia and told the tiger Princess, “When Dash shows up, tell him he can sit here, next to you.” Then she smiled at Saderia and went back to teaching. Saderia smiled back at her, happy at the privilege of sitting next to her best friend, but she was still apprehensive about his absence. And why did everyone but her seem to know the reason for it?

The animals got ready to go to the library and still Dash didn’t show up, but as Saderia walked down the hall to the library with the rest of the class, a lion came racing over to them.

“Dash!” Saderia exclaimed happily.

Dash looked her way and gave her a happy look but then he turned to Ms. Spot, out of breath, and looking very worried. “I’m so sorry I’m late!” he exclaimed. “I...”

“Excused,” Ms. Spot told him gently, with a concerned expression. “I understand. Go to the classroom to put up your book bag and then join us in the library.”

“Thanks, Ms. Spot,” he muttered, starting toward the classroom while he tried to catch his breath. Saderia noticed that leaves, twigs and

burs stuck to his fur and his book bag, and there were a few tiny cuts on his paws and legs.

“Can I go with him?” she asked Ms. Spot, feeling relieved when the leopard teacher nodded in approval.

She bolted after Dash and caught up to him as Lizzie muttered behind her, “I can’t believe that *freak* gets excused when *we* don’t!”

Saderia fell into step beside her best friend and looked at him in concern as he caught his breath. “Are you okay?” she asked. “What happened to you?” She began flicking a few leaves and twigs out of his fur with her tail, using her paw to work out the prickly burs.

“Nothing,” he muttered. “I’m just late sometimes and then I have to rush to get here.”

“Why were you late?” she asked worriedly, glancing at the cuts in concern.

“It’s nothing,” he said again, absently wiping blood from one of the deeper cuts away with his dark brown tail. He sighed. “I just overslept, okay? I don’t exactly have anything or anyone to wake me up in the woods and it took me, like, three hours to get to sleep anyway. I just woke up five minutes ago and then I had to run to get to school on time. And I know I look like a mess. It’s a little disorienting when I first wake up, so I couldn’t really avoid the leaves and stuff. And thorny vines are the only things that seem to grow in winter which is really annoying!” He lashed his tail as his voice rose bitterly but he kept walking briskly to the classroom.

So that was what everyone seemed to be skirting around. Saderia felt bad for him, wondering if there was anything she could do to help him. By then they had reached the classroom and Dash went to the back to put his stuff up and get ready for the rest of the class later on. Saderia helped him get ready, saying, “You sit by me now, by the way. Up front. Ms. Spot switched the seats.”

He smiled slightly. “That’s great!” Despite the rush of that morning, he was extremely glad to see Saderia and it was even better that they would be able to sit together.

Saderia smiled, but then she thought about something he had told her moments ago. Frowning, she asked curiously, “Why did it take you so long to get to sleep?”

Dash froze in his hurry to get the stuff out of his book bag, and turned to glance at her with sad amber eyes before glancing away. “Nothing,” he muttered in a despondent voice.

Saderia frowned, narrowing her amber eyes in confusion. “What?” she asked. “You can tell me. What’s wrong?”

He shook his head, starting to grab his things again, hissing quietly when a bunch of books spilled out of the bottom of his book bag, through the hole Grath had made a while ago. “It’s not important.”

“Why won’t you tell me?” Saderia bent down to help him pick up the things that had fallen.

Dash looked up for a moment, as if looking for some sort of escape, then sighed and kept his head turned toward his book bag. “Just nightmares, okay? It’s no big deal.”

“Nightmares?”

“Yeah, they kept me up all night, but whatever. It’s not that big a deal,” he emphasized.

She paused, not needing her instincts to tell her that this was very uncomfortable territory. But she couldn’t help the concern she felt for him, especially considering her own experience with nightmares. “I’ve had nightmares before,” she said cautiously. “Do you...want to talk about it?”

“No,” he replied curtly. “Can we just drop it?”

Stifling a sigh, Saderia replied, “All right, I’m just trying to help.”

Dash sucked in a quick breath, angry at himself for being so irritable, if not downright mean, but he hadn’t exactly had a great start to his day. His nightmares had been about the horrible past, about his father, about what he had done to kill his father... He shivered, then pushed the thought away and turned to Saderia. “I know. I’m sorry. This just isn’t a good start to the day, you know?”

“I understand,” Saderia replied. “We’re going to the library so you can relax there.”

“Okay,” he murmured, finally gathering all that he would need and taking it to his new desk. Then the two of them walked down the empty hallway in the direction of the school library, pushing through the doors silently and going to sit on the carpet.

Saderia decided to change the subject to something more uplifting and tried, “Um...I’ve got good news! Mr. Delaca talked to me this morning and he’s stopped judging me! Everyone sees me as I am now!” Then she wondered, ashamed, if that were a selfish thing to say after what had happened to him. She just wanted Dash to cheer up and hoped changing the subject was enough.

But Dash did try to cheer himself up at that news, struggling to push images of his father from his mind. He didn’t want to risk thinking about him when he was around Saderia, as if she could read his mind, so he made himself smile and say, “That’s great! It’s about time everyone got to see what a great animal you are!”

Her amber eyes lit up. “Thanks.” Her tail curled up happily as she exclaimed, “I can’t wait to tell my Mom and Dad! They’ll be so proud!”

The King and Queen. Dash’s cheerful façade wavered at the mention of them, but he forced himself to look unchanged. “They should be,” he commented, hoping his face didn’t show how much he feared them.

Her gaze relaxed into a less excited but still happy expression. “I kind of missed you today, when you didn’t come.”

He blinked. “Really?” He had actually felt very unhappy when he had to go home and say goodbye to Saderia, but he didn’t know that she felt that way. He knew his unhappiness didn’t just come from the depressing atmosphere of the woods, but from missing Saderia. Could she really feel the same?

“Yeah.” Saderia felt like Dash knew her best of all and he could be there for her. And she didn’t exactly need her instincts, her Dreams or the prophecy to tell her that; it was very plain for her to see. They got along great and if she ever felt afraid it would be easier to deal with if Dash was with her, as her Dream had proved. To her, they were so close they were practically brother and sister. Maybe that was why she felt a twinge of sadness when they had to go to their separate homes in the afternoon.

“Me too,” he replied cautiously, starting to feel just a little bit better even though he’d barely had two hours of undisturbed sleep last night.

“I’m glad we’re friends,” Saderia replied.

“Me too,” Dash said more comfortably, this time meaning it without any doubts.

“I’ll see you next week!” Saderia called, trying to ignore the prickle of disappointment that she wouldn’t get to see her best friend for two days.

“See you then, Saderia!” Dash called, starting to walk down the steps toward the woods. But then he froze when his eyes darted to a specific space in the crowd of animals that were meeting their parents and leaving.

Saderia’s amber eyes followed his and she found herself looking directly at her parents who were waiting for her as usual. She frowned in bewilderment at how still and tense Dash had gotten.

For the past few days, Dash had been able to slip away from the school without having to hide until he was sure Saderia and her family were gone because Saderia’s parents had shown up later. Now he was horrified; the King and Queen had never been right there in the clearing whenever he left the school, but they were there now. What if they saw him? What if they recognized him? His friendship with Saderia was over if they saw him! How was he going to get out of there unnoticed?

Then he realized he was being a moron, since there were about a hundred other animals down there looking for their parents. Slipping away wasn’t *that* hard.

“Dash, are you okay?” Saderia asked, tipping her head in confusion.

“Fine,” he muttered briskly. “I’ll see you tomor—er, Monday.”

Keeping his head down, he slid into the crowd, keeping low to the ground and staring at the King and Queen to make sure they didn’t look his way. He managed to make it to the woods without them noticing him and he breathed a sigh of relief, even though terror still made his dark brown fur stand on end. But now he couldn’t ignore the hard, painful truth. The King and Queen *could* have seen him just then. He couldn’t hide forever.

Saderia thought Dash had acted very strangely, but she shook it off and darted down the steps toward her parents, grinning broadly. “Hi, Mom! Hi, Dad!” she called, rushing over to the two royal tigers.

“Saderia!” Karenisha exclaimed, rushing over to greet her. “How was your day?”

“It was perfect!” Saderia replied, her tail curling up in excitement.

“Perfect, huh?” Makero said. “Did you get an A?”

“Well, yes, but something even better happened! Mr. Delaca and the teachers are finally looking past my Princess title and accepting me!”

“That’s great!” Makero exclaimed as Karenisha said, “That’s excellent!”

“We knew you could do it,” Makero praised, flicking her playfully with his tail.

“I had to do the same thing,” Karenisha told her, adding, “Cia didn’t bother, but I did, and it was great when everyone finally figured out that I’m the exact opposite of ‘Princess.’”

Saderia laughed. “It is great! And you’re a great Queen now, so does that mean I’ll be a great Queen?”

Karenisha smiled. “You’ll be the best Queen the forest has ever seen!”

“You’re already the best Princess,” Makero agreed.

Saderia beamed, although she knew it was an exaggeration. And then she had another thought: Whether she was the best Princess or not, she definitely had the best friend the forest had ever seen.

Chapter Eleven

One-Sided Trust

A week passed by, and it was an amazing week as far as Saderia was concerned. Ms. Spot and Ms. Zanah now treated her differently than before, greeting her like she was any other student and not making any special allowances for her but not hating her either. She got good grades and did what she could to get along with everybody. She and Loki stayed close, talking and playing at recess, not to mention defending themselves against the L's and Grath. Loki was a good animal to have on her side.

But Saderia and Dash were even closer. They looked forward to seeing each other every day. By now, most of the school knew about them and how close they were, just because Saderia was a Princess. They also knew that Saderia didn't act like a stereotypical Princess, and most of them respected her for that and treated her like anyone else, just a popular anyone else, since they all knew about her.

Saderia thought Dash had come a long way from being so shy to meeting her at the school doors everyday and hanging out with her at lunch and recess. She still didn't know why he acted so strangely sometimes, but she guessed it was only a matter of time before they both came clean about whatever secrets they had. He still froze up whenever she mentioned her parents, which was odd. But he didn't have to worry about seeing them in the mornings or afternoons anymore because Karenisha and Makero had recently allowed her to walk to and from school by herself, if she wanted. Since she thought it would make Dash more comfortable, she agreed, happy for the freedom.

Dash was overjoyed to see her every day and he always looked forward to talking to his new best friend at school, even after a night of nightmares out in the woods. He loved their friendship, but a shadow of doubt hung over him like a storm cloud. There was no denying that now he would be crushed if their friendship came to an end. The thought was

horrifying but he stopped letting that get him down and just enjoyed what time he could have with his best friend.

Saderia was kind and Dash knew that he seemed happier and more outgoing, and that he was doing better in school. Some of the animals, excluding the L's and Grath, stopped thinking he was such a freak and even said hi to him every now and then when they passed by. Loki hung around a lot and she had a bit of a quick temper but she was fun to be with, and he definitely appreciated her loyal defense against Grath and the L's.

But he hadn't stopped having nightmares; if anything, they had only gotten worse. Much as he wanted to deny it, playing with Saderia made him think of his past. It was kind of hard not to think about it with the Princess standing in front of him, considering her involvement in what had happened before. But he was still glad to see her and he couldn't help but feel a twinge of unhappiness whenever he had to leave and go to his woods.

When Saderia and Dash met up at the school doors on Monday of the next week, Saderia was excited. "Hi, Dash!" she greeted him as usual when she saw him waiting for her inside the school. "I talked to my parents earlier and they said it was okay if I came to hang out at your woods for a while. Is that okay?"

"Sure," he agreed quickly.

"Okay, great," Saderia said as they began walking to class. They were met by Loki who was laughing to herself quietly.

"Hi, Loki," Dash greeted her.

Saderia echoed the greeting then asked, "What's so funny?"

Loki just rolled her eyes. "You had to see it. On my way to school, I caught up with Grath and he was trying to act tough and so he started to jump at me to fight but I just calmly stepped out of the way. And it's not my fault either, because I swear I didn't know there was a beehive behind me."

Saderia's eyes widened and she couldn't help but laugh. "He ran into the bees and they attacked him?"

"Hey, bees have rights, too," Loki pointed out. "How would you like it if some oaf smashed your cool beehive? I'd sting him, too!"

Saderia tried to hide a grin. “Maybe there is such a thing as karma,” she replied.

“Maybe, and it sure is fun. Anyway, I was waiting out here to tell you that Ms. Spot is planning to give us a pop quiz today in first period, but you didn’t hear it from me, got it?”

“Got it.”

Loki grinned. “Good, I’ll see you guys at recess.” After she’d stepped into the classroom and over to her seat, Saderia and Dash quickly followed and sat next to each other in their own seats. Ms. Spot walked to the front of the classroom and the day began normally. They went to a new Art Area soon, an art class with several tables all stained with watercolor paints, crayons, and clay. There were big sheets of paper and cubbies filled with artwork along the back, and a book shelf with drawing books. The teacher, Ms. Livij, told them each to draw a still-life portrait of something they liked to do, and Saderia drew a picture of her and Dash playing in the woods.

The rest of the day went on as habit, except when Ms. Spot or Ms. Zanah assigned the rest of the class work, Saderia got a more advanced worksheet. Saderia talked with Dash at lunch and included Loki in their games at recess. Finally, the students were dismissed from school and Saderia and Dash walked out of the building together then started toward the woods. It felt so normal to Dash, as if he were just bringing a normal friend to a normal house like other animals did, instead of taking his best friend, the Princess, to the woods. But he still enjoyed walking with her along the woodsy path of shrubs, thickets and trees to the clearing that was, unfortunately, his home.

“Well, here we are,” he announced, stepping into the clearing.

Saderia looked around and noticed it looked even barer than it had the last time she had been there. She was silently relieved that she had been sharing her lunch with Dash every day since it didn’t look like much was growing. But Dash seemed happy to be with her, so she ignored the negative thoughts and padded swiftly into the clearing.

The pair of them played hide and seek for a while, then forest tag, a game they made up since they had to swerve a lot to avoid hitting trees, and

other games. Finally, when they were tired out, they laid back in the clearing and stared up at the sky where puffy white clouds were floating.

“That one looks like an eagle,” Saderia said, pointing at a cloud.

Dash frowned and stared at it more intently, then nodded. “I see it now. What about that one? It looks kind of like Grath after he came in today.” He flicked his tail toward a darker cloud in almost the shape of a head with what looked like steam coming out of its ears.

Saderia laughed. “Yeah, I guess it does.” She sighed, smiling up at the sky. “Me and Mom and Dad did this the other day,” she said.

He glanced at her. “Really?”

“Yeah,” she murmured, closing her eyes as the sun shone down on her. “We always do fun stuff like that now.” She blinked open her amber eyes, which were now filled with cautious curiosity. “Did your...father ever do anything like that with you?” She was hesitant, since she knew it was a rocky subject.

Dash winced and Saderia was immediately sorry she brought it up.

“No,” Dash muttered. “...He never had anything to do with me. He had...other things to think about.” Disturbing things.

“Oh,” Saderia murmured. She hadn’t heard much about Dash’s parents or what they were like, just that his father was dead and his mother had left a long time ago. “Sorry,” she murmured.

Dash just sighed and leaned back, looking up at the sky. “It’s okay.” He’d always known he was an unpleasant accident to his pathetic excuse for a family. It wasn’t Saderia’s fault they hated him.

Saderia glanced over at him and made a quick decision. “Can I tell you something?” she asked. “And you won’t be...freaked out? And you’ll believe me?”

Dash slowly turned his head to look at her, getting a bad feeling about where this was going. But he was her friend, so he said, “Of course.”

Saderia took a deep breath. “Well, I want to tell you the story of...of my past.”

Oh, no. Dash swallowed uncomfortably, feeling it catch in his throat. He brusquely turned away from her, wondering if there was any way

to get out of it. There wasn't. So he took a deep breath, reminding himself that he'd always known he'd have to deal with this sometime, and turned back to Saderia, trying to act clueless. "Your past? Okay, go ahead, if you want."

Saderia took a deep breath and was silent for a moment, pondering how to begin, and *if* she should begin. But her friend had a right to know. "Ten years ago," she began, "there was a huge fire, and that fire supposedly killed my parents. I was just a baby at the time, and I grew up without them, under my aunt and uncle's supervision. I never really had a voice and I longed to have my parents back, because I knew they'd treat me better, like I actually mattered. I knew they'd understand me better than Cia and Uncle Jash, and I'd have more say."

It was already harder than Dash had prepared for, hearing the sadness in her voice when she talked about missing her parents so much. She had had a great, wonderful life ahead of her but when she hadn't even reached her first year that had been taken from her. He felt horrible, but he knew that if he couldn't take this part, he would be destroyed when she got to the next part.

"Then one day I had a dream and that's sort of what got me curious about my parents and about the fire," Saderia went on. "But I didn't investigate then. Me and my aunt and uncle went to a royal meeting to talk with their advisors about a kidnapping problem that was going on." She paused, then took a deep breath and went on, "That's where I met Dastarius."

Dash froze and for a moment he actually stopped breathing. Then he took a deep, silent breath, reminding himself that he already knew this story by heart and hearing it one more time wouldn't kill him. Trying not to sound as terrified and tense as he was, he said, "Go on."

"He was supposedly one of my parents' most trusted advisors," she spat, "and he came back to help Cia and Uncle Jash with the problem." Her eyes narrowed angrily. "Anyway, he was a jerk, and he acted all cool and in charge and it really made me mad. I got a really bad feeling about him then, and I understand it now."

She went on to describe everything she had done to discover the truth about the fire: how she'd gone to libraries and gotten bad information, and how she would run into Dastarius every now and then. Then she told him how she had started to suspect Cia and Uncle Jash of being the ones who had murdered her parents and how she had run away.

"I went to town to see if they were trying to find me, and hid in the woods just outside of town. Dastarius found me there and I was stupid enough to tell him everything that happened." She gritted her teeth. "And then I was actually dumb enough to go to his home, where he was probably planning to lock me up later. But then I wanted to go back to my house to get my mother's diary since I had left it behind. When I got there, a bunch of animals, the ones that had their children kidnapped, ran in and attacked us, knocking us unconscious."

Dash closed his eyes, knowing what was coming and feeling worse than ever.

"When I woke up, I was in a dungeon, and my Mom and Dad were there. They told me that they had been kidnapped by Dastarius, who came down there to torment Mom. They said the only reason he kept them alive was because Karenisha knew how to get into Queen Tarae's tomb where that scroll that gave an animal the Power of Dreams was hidden. She wouldn't tell him since the stakes weren't high enough. But now that he had me, he was planning on hurting me to make Mom tell him, and then blame all of our deaths on Cia and Uncle Jash.

"Mom told me all about the Dream thing down there and that she was the only one who knew how to get into that tomb, and that she would have passed it on to me if she hadn't been captured. We stayed down there for a while and I thought we were done for. But then," she went on, and Dash pricked his ears. "Then one night, the door to the dungeon opened and somebody—I still don't know who—came down and told me to escape through some air vent in my cell, and gave me a screwdriver to get into it."

Dash tensed again and turned away, not trusting his own reactions. "How odd," he murmured, keeping his voice steady.

"I know. So I escaped even though I didn't want to leave Mom, Dad, Cia and Uncle Jash behind. But then I fell asleep and woke up the next

morning with this weird note telling me to go to an old cabin. I think it was from the same animal that helped me escape, but I'm not sure since I still don't know who it was. I've always wondered about it, too...But anyway, I followed the note and realized that Dastarius had kidnapped those children to get the thugs that attacked us to work for him with the promise that he'd find the children. I found the dungeon keys in the cabin, and then went back to Dastarius's house.

"But when I got to Mom and Dad, I found out that Mom had given him the code to get into the tomb because she thought he had recaptured me. We went to the tomb and I managed to follow him, but the tomb closed, locking my family out. So I was alone and I had to stop Dastarius from getting the scroll, so we fought. But he pinned me, and he almost killed me, but then Mom and Dad ran down and attacked him while I got the scroll."

"Dastarius almost killed you," Dash repeated, almost hoarsely.

It didn't exactly sound like a question, but Saderia took it as one. "Yeah, but I'm okay. Anyway, I read the scroll and it had the words that would give an animal the Power of Dreams. But then my Dad killed Dastarius..."

Dash winced, and turned away. Saderia turned to him in concern. "Are you okay? What'd I say?" she asked worriedly.

Dash closed his eyes for a minute and made sure his voice didn't betray any emotion as he just murmured, "I'm fine. You didn't say anything. I just...don't like violence, I guess. Never mind, go on."

"Sorry," Saderia said gently. "But he...well, he kind of deserved it after all he did."

Dash sighed. "Yeah, he did. Go on."

Saderia stared at him for a moment, then turned her gaze back to the sky and continued, "So Dastarius was...gone. And then the words on the scroll changed to the prophecy and I was literally glowing!"

"Glowing?" he asked, making his voice sound surprised even though hardly anything would surprise him anymore.

"Yeah, and so were the words of the prophecy. And then I had my family back and we left the tomb. We explained what happened to the forest

and I was so happy to have my family back. Then after we got used to living with Mom and Dad for a while, they arranged for me to go to school, and then...well, then I met you!" She paused. "At least that part's a happy ending."

Somehow Dash knew it was far from being the end but he just forced himself to smile at her. "Cool story. It's great that you finally have your parents back."

"I know. But I still wonder who it was that helped me," Saderia admitted, her eyes suddenly distant with wonder.

Dash looked away. "Yeah, I...would too, I guess." Then he looked her in the eye. "Do you think you'll find out someday?"

She shrugged. "Maybe. I hope so. But maybe some mysteries will just be mysteries forever."

He sighed. "Maybe." Suddenly he looked up at the sky. "It's getting kind of late. Maybe you should go home to your parents. They'll probably be waiting for you."

Saderia glanced up and noticed the setting sun, too. "You're right!" she exclaimed. She paused. "Anyway, I'm glad you listened to my story. I didn't know if you would believe me and I was a little nervous about it at first, but you're my best friend so..."

Dash managed to smile at her. "No problem. What are best friends for? You're lucky to have such great parents, and a cool story."

"Thanks." She glanced at the sky and gave him a hasty smile. "I guess I should get home, though. I'll see you tomorrow, Dash! Bye!"

"Bye, Saderia," he murmured as she raced away through the woods. For a long moment, he stared at the spot where she had disappeared into the woods before he realized he was crying. He blinked several times, listening for the sound of her paw steps in the woods. When he was sure she was well on her way back to her magnificent, *complete* home, he let himself break down and cry as the woods grew darker.

Betrayal slashed through Saderia sharper than any claws ever could and she twisted in agony on her blue bed. In her Dream, she saw an image

of herself telling her story to Dash, who couldn't meet her eyes. She turned away from him as one of the memories made her flinch, and when she turned back, Dash was gone; in his place Dastarius was glaring at her. Suddenly he sneered at her. *This isn't over...*

The glowing words of the prophecy lit up her Dream vision, and then she was running through the forest, unable to control what she did in her Dream. "Why?" she called, over and over as she raced on through the forest. After several moments, she realized that her voice had gotten slightly lower and quieter, and realized that it wasn't her voice; it was Dash's.

Through the trees in the Dream forest, she caught sight of Dash in a clearing, looking down. She kept running and another tree blocked her vision. When she could see through the brush again, Dash was gone. She looked ahead and saw amber eyes staring out at her through the bushes up ahead. "Dash?" she called hopefully, running faster. But suddenly the amber eyes narrowed into slits and a growl echoed through the forest, the last thing Saderia heard before she jolted awake in her bed.

"Saderia!"

Saderia blinked the blurriness out of her eyes and found herself staring up at Karenisha.

"Mom?" she asked groggily, wondering why everything seemed to hurt at the moment.

Karenisha brushed a few drops of sweat from Saderia's forehead. "You have to relax, Saderia, you're so tense."

"Why?" she replied, feeling utterly disoriented.

"You had a Dream," she told her daughter gently.

Saderia shivered as the Dream came back to her, but she couldn't tell why this one had such a huge effect on her. It didn't seem all that horrible to her; she had had worse Dreams. But it gave her a bad premonition that something awful was going to happen, and she felt a chill run down her spine. Nonetheless, she took her mother's advice and forced herself to relax, sighing in relief when she stopped hurting so much from her cramped position.

Saderia looked up at Karenisha. "What happened?" she asked.

“You Dreamed,” Karenisha repeated.

“No, I mean the Dream... It...hurt.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” the Queen asked gently.

Saderia shook her head, still feeling groggy and not even sure where to begin describing the Dream. “It was weird because it didn’t seem that bad. But it just gives me this feeling.”

“I know what you’re talking about; I’ve had them, too. Do you need help figuring it out?”

“Maybe later or something. I’m not even awake...”

“Okay.” Karenisha waited until Saderia sat up in bed and managed to calm herself down enough to think properly, before she left her daughter alone. “You have school in a moment,” she told her before shutting the door. “If you need me, though, just call for me.”

“Okay,” Saderia murmured, angry at herself for not being able to understand the Dream or the feeling. What good were the Dreams if she couldn’t even figure them out in time to prevent whatever bad thing was coming? Groaning, she hoped that she would get more hints later. Maybe she could talk it over with Dash...but no, she didn’t think that would be a great idea since it involved him and some part of her was telling her to wait. Some instinct was telling her that she could tell Dash anything but she would have to wait for them to get past some unknown boundary. It made no sense to her.

Feeling tired, she got up to pad out of her room and down the hallway to the front room where Karenisha and Makero were waiting.

“Are you okay?” Makero asked her gently. “Your Mom said you had a Dream.”

Saderia wanted to tell them about her frustration with her Dreams and how she didn’t know how to handle them yet, but she just sighed, keeping it to herself for the moment. “It’s difficult, but I’m just going to wait for more hints. I should get to school now, right?” She couldn’t help but perk up a little at the thought of seeing Dash again.

“All right,” Karenisha replied gently. “Go on then. We’ll see you in the afternoon.”

“Bye, Mom and Dad. Bye, Cia and Uncle Jash!” she called louder to her aunt and uncle who were sitting in the dining room. They called goodbye to her and she padded out of the door, breaking into a run when her paws touched the dirt path leading into town, hoping the rush of the wind would calm her.

When she reached the clearing in front of the school, she slowed to a halt when she noticed Dash sliding out of one of the bushes on the edge of the clearing. She called out a greeting, racing happily toward him.

Dash looked up at her and smiled as she ran up to him. He had recovered from last night, telling himself to just get on with life and try to make their friendship last as long as possible. But it was hard when he was so scared of losing it. Then he noticed how tired she looked, and the twinge of anxiety in her amber eyes, and he became concerned. “What’s wrong?”

Saderia looked down uneasily. “I had a Dream last night,” she admitted. “I don’t know how to deal with them. I guess I’m too afraid to tell Mom and Dad about it because they might be disappointed in me and it’ll just prove that I’m not the right animal for the prophecy.”

“They wouldn’t be disappointed,” Dash told her softly. “They’d understand. Your Mom has Dreams, right? She’d probably help you.”

“Maybe, but I’d just feel more comfortable talking about it with someone else.”

“Well, I’m here,” he said a bit uncomfortably.

“I know, but I just... I just need time to figure it out on my own, I guess.” She clawed the ground. “It just seems so complicated sometimes.”

“You think *your* life is complicated, try living mine,” Dash muttered under his breath.

Saderia looked up and frowned. “What was that?”

“Nothing,” he said quickly, averting his eyes.

Saderia blinked and then just looked toward the school. “I’m just going to get on with life and forget the Dream stuff for a while.”

“That’s a good idea, I guess. Just relax,” he agreed.

“I suppose. So what’d you do after I left?”

Dash winced invisibly. "Nothing, just what I normally do." Eat, make sure he had enough food for the next day, think about his past, stay awake for three hours thinking about it, go to sleep and have nightmares, then wake up happy to go to school and see Saderia. What a life, he thought. The painful memories had really gotten to him yesterday, though, and he preferred not to relive it. "Come on, we should get to class," he said, changing the subject as he hurried toward the steps.

"I guess you're right," Saderia agreed, following after him to Ms. Spot's class room. In homeroom, Ms. Spot handed out a bunch of worksheets on math, and Saderia quickly completed them, understanding it all easily. But when she looked over at Dash, she noticed that he was having trouble. She leaned over his desk and whispered, "Need help?"

"Yeah," he muttered. "This stuff is so impossible."

"No, it's not. Here, I'll show you." She went on to show him how to do some of the problems, although something bothered her. She stared at Dash's paper; there was something hauntingly familiar about his handwriting. Shaking it off, she continued to help him until he eventually got the hang of it, thanking her before he did the rest of it on his own.

"Hey, while you're helping everyone become less stupid, can you tell me what the heck this means," Loki whispered to Saderia, with a glance at her paper.

Saderia smiled. "Sure, Loki." She leaned over and helped her other friend with one of the problems until Loki said she got it and finished it.

When the day progressed to lunch and then recess, Saderia and Dash played a few rounds of basketball, letting Loki join in after a while, and then both of them were beaten. Loki stopped playing after a few rounds and went to go do something else, leaving them alone.

Near the end of recess, Saderia was having a lot of fun. But she felt an unexpected pang of sadness when she realized that the day would soon be over and she would have to say goodbye to her best friend. Then she had a thought and she smiled at Dash eagerly. "Hey," she said. "Why don't you come over to my house this afternoon?"

Dash froze, a sense of dread making him feel terrified. "I...don't think that's a good idea," he said, trying to keep his voice steady.

Saderia frowned. “Why not? You should meet my family. They’re really nice.”

“I...can’t,” Dash protested.

“Why not?” she exclaimed. She made her voice calmer and more sympathetic. “Please? They’re not like you’d think. They’re not really formal or anything and you don’t have to worry about meeting them just because they’re royalty. They’re really nice and fair and not intimidating.”

The fact that Saderia’s parents were royalty wasn’t exactly what was keeping Dash away. “Sorry,” he muttered. “I just...can’t.”

“Please,” she pleaded. “Come on, it feels really awkward if you don’t come, like you’re, well, scared of my parents.”

He was scared of them; *very* scared, but he couldn’t tell her that. “I’m sorry...” he began.

“You don’t have to come today,” she went on. “You can come later in the week, like Friday.”

“But...” Dash looked up and couldn’t stop himself from seeing the friendly hope in Saderia’s amber eyes. He didn’t want to disappoint her or upset her and so, without thinking, he blurted out, “Friday will be fine.”

Saderia’s eyes lit up. “Great! It’ll be so cool! I’ll show you around and it’ll be fun! Once you get to know them, my family’s amazing!”

Dash said nothing; he wanted to melt into the ground or disappear, whichever got him out of this the easiest. What was he *thinking*? He couldn’t go to Saderia’s house and meet her parents, the *King and Queen!* He would die, or at the very least have to give up his friendship with Saderia. *Why* had he agreed to it? He was crazy, and that was the only conclusion he could come to.

He knew he couldn’t back out of it now; Saderia looked so happy and she would be crushed, not to mention he’d be a jerk for changing his mind so quickly. But was being a nice guy really worth losing Saderia’s friendship and/or dying? No.

Still, he couldn’t help but hope that maybe if he went and got it over with...well, it would all be okay. He could leave his past behind and he

wouldn't have to keep secrets anymore. Personally, he thought he was smart enough not to hope for that, but apparently not.

There was a *slight* chance that Karenisha and Makero wouldn't recognize him and he could just get away with going there and acting like a normal friend. And even if they did recognize him there was, again, a *slight* chance that they would let him explain and he would be forgiven. Maybe they wouldn't judge him too quickly or make assumptions, and then he could just go on being Saderia's friend without secrets. Maybe even with the King and Queen's approval. *Yeah, right...*

Okay, so that was probably wistful thinking and the more probable result would be that the moment Karenisha and Makero saw him, they'd scream and kill him or run him out of the forest or something along those lines. At the very least, his friendship with Saderia would be completely and utterly destroyed before he even got a chance to defend himself.

Then again, Karenisha and Makero did seem fair, so maybe it would be all right...but he was just going in circles. There were only three things he knew for certain: one, Friday would determine whether he and Saderia stayed friends; two, there was no way he was getting out of it now; and, three, he should probably enjoy the time he had with Saderia until that day. Oh, and there was a fourth thing too: that he had most likely lost his mind, but he had figured that out a long time ago.

Dash *really* wanted to hate Saderia; it would make everything so much easier. If he hated her, he wouldn't have to fear Friday so much. But he knew he couldn't hate her now, not when they were best friends. Either karma or his own stupidity prevented him from making life any easier for himself, so there was nothing that could be done about it now.

The next day, Wednesday, Dash was haunted by the fact that there was only forty-eight hours until the cursed day. He greeted Saderia in the morning, same as always, but when they went to first period, he hardly paid any attention to what Ms. Spot was saying, thinking instead of some way to get out of it or at least survive it.

By lunchtime, he was so caught up in his desperate thoughts that, at first, he didn't notice how concerned Saderia looked. But when she offered

him some of her lunch since he'd barely had enough berries to keep him alive, he noticed her downcast tone and the haunted look on her face.

He accepted the lunch like he normally did, but gave her a curious, concerned look. "Saderia, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I guess so," she muttered dejectedly.

He tried to guess what it was that was troubling her from the way she looked. Her amber eyes were gazing off into the distance at something he couldn't see, and they were narrowed almost in confusion, as if she were struggling to figure something out. Her fluffy tail swished across the floor in nervousness and frustration.

"Did you have a Dream?" he guessed.

Saderia snapped out of her fog to look at him in confusion. "How'd you know that?"

He shrugged. "You just...look that way. I don't know how to describe it."

Saderia blinked. "Well, I did have a Dream."

"And you...How'd you put it? Got a bad feeling from it? Your Dreams can predict the future, right? Is this one hard to figure out?" Did it have anything to do with him? Was he going to die or were they going to stop being friends? Of course he didn't ask any of that and just gave her a caring look, trying to get to the bottom of it.

Saderia was surprised; usually only Karenisha could guess the things she was feeling like that. "Yeah," she murmured.

"You can talk to me about it, if you want," Dash suggested hesitantly, wanting to help his friend.

Saderia took a deep breath. "It's confusing. But this is what happened... First, you were there, but then you ran away into the woods. I sensed something...I get that sometimes in Dreams—I sense a certain emotion—and the emotion this time was a sense of betrayal... But then I ran after you and I thought I saw amber eyes in one of the bushes in the woods. And I thought it was you so I went toward them, but then Dastarius—you remember what I told you about him?"

"I know about Dastarius," Dash muttered grimly.

“Okay. So then Dastarius stepped out of the bushes and I heard these words...his last words before he died: ‘This isn’t over...’”

Dash couldn’t help but think that he was right about that, at least. Then he shivered. *Dastarius’s last words...*

“Then I heard you shout something, it went dark and I woke up,” Saderia went on, shaking her head. “Can you make any sense out of all that? Because I can’t!”

Dash was silent for a long moment, trying to see something in that mess since he knew that Saderia could predict the future. *A sense of betrayal...* That hurt. And he could easily guess what her Dream was trying to tell her there. Great, even her Dreams were against him. *Then you ran away...* Okay, so things were going to go badly on Friday; what else could that mean? Could he still go there and hope for the best knowing that he would probably have to run? Unfortunately, he probably had to.

Then there was the part about Dastarius...and he didn’t even want to think about that.

If he was a good friend, he’d probably tell Saderia what he thought the Dream meant so that she could understand and wouldn’t have to feel so confused. If he was a good friend, he’d come clean about everything right there. But he was too scared to tell her anything.

Oh, well, Saderia deserved a better friend than him anyway; the thought nearly tore him apart.

“I don’t know what your Dream could mean,” Dash mumbled, hating himself more than ever. Saderia was heroic, having stood up to danger courageously, and done amazing things that no one else could do, and he couldn’t even tell her the truth. Jeez, why didn’t her instincts tell her to stay away from him when he was such a horrible friend? “Sorry, Saderia. Maybe you’ll figure it out later on.” He knew the exact date she would figure it out: Friday.

Saderia sighed. “Oh well. Thanks for listening at least.”

“No problem.” He wanted to claw himself.

By recess, Saderia was feeling a little better and the two of them played together, racing, playing tag and having a great time. Dash would

sure miss it later on.

The next day, Thursday, went the same way and when Saderia went home to her parents she was feeling excited about Friday. “Mom! Dad!” she called, racing down the dirt path toward her home.

Karenisha and Makero emerged from the house and ran over to greet her.

“How was school?” Makero asked.

“Great!” Saderia exclaimed. “As always. Anyway, is it okay if my friend comes over here to meet you guys tomorrow?”

“Of course,” Karenisha purred. “We’d love to meet him.”

“He’s kind of nervous about the royalty thing, but I think it’ll be great,” Saderia replied, beaming at her parents.

Makero smiled. “I’m sure it will be. Now come on, let’s go get dinner,” he added, sweeping his tail toward the house as he bounded inside with his family behind him.

“Yeah, I made Cia cook today,” Karenisha said enthusiastically. “We had a bet that if I could climb the tallest tree near our house, she’d have to cook, and if I couldn’t make it, I’d have to do it.”

“Just like when you were kids,” Makero said, shaking his head.

“I sure showed her, though,” Karenisha retorted, grinning.

Saderia smiled at her happy family, feeling a warm, internal glow as she padded into the dining room where her aunt and uncle were already seated. She leapt up to her chair and began to eat over the gold table.

“How’s school going?” Cia asked her.

“Great!” Saderia exclaimed. “Good grades, no prejudice, great friends...It’s amazing!” Except for her strange Dreams, that is.

“Sounds like you’re adjusting well,” Uncle Jash agreed. “But then, was there ever any doubt?”

Saderia grinned. “Yeah, it was pretty easy to get used to.”

“Getting sick of it yet?” he asked.

“Not at all!” She loved learning and seeing her friends every day, especially since it was the only place she could play with Dash. Of course, that might change on Friday.

“Well, I’m glad you like it,” Cia said happily, although she still looked a little guilty for her failed attempt at raising Saderia the way she had thought was best.

“I’m advanced because I learned on my own, before,” Saderia offered to try to make her happier.

Cia smiled faintly. “That’s good.”

Once Saderia and her family finished their dinner, Karenisha and Makero took her outside to play in the woods. When the stars came out, they all laid down and connected the shiny points of light to form pictures. Cia and Uncle Jash came out a moment later and joined them, all laughing as they created something really strange looking. But then it grew darker and Saderia had to go to sleep, saying goodnight to her family and praying for a Dreamless sleep as she pulled her blue blanket up to her nose.

In the background there was an evil, condescending laugh as she felt a huge tide of betrayed emotions surge over her, threatening to drown her. Confusion and disbelief tried to drag her down into despair. But somewhere there was a light, a way out of the darkness, but just as she was about to reach it, a dark brown paw reached out and took it away, shredding it into pieces as a snarl reverberated around the dark Dream. Then, *This isn’t over...*

Saderia bolted awake and growled to herself in frustration; why couldn’t she start a day with a good Dream? Was her past and Dastarius destined to haunt her forever? Shaking herself, she pushed the Dream away, refusing to think about it, although her instinct yelled at her about how foolish she was being. She knew she had her Dreams for a reason, but they were annoying, especially when she couldn’t figure them out! Couldn’t she just be normal for once, without the Dreams, the prophecy and the intuition?

Trying to ignore the bad feeling that was telling her to *pay attention to her Dreams!* she padded out of her room. In the dining room, she wolfed

down some breakfast before calling goodbye to her parents and reminding them happily that today would be the day her friend came over.

When she made it to the school and saw Dash waiting for her in the clearing, she bounded over to greet him excitedly.

“Hi, Saderia,” Dash replied, thinking that it would probably be more appropriate to say *Goodbye*.

But Dash was surprisingly a little bit calmer about the situation, although he was more resigned to his fate than confident about it. He probably should never have expected his friendship with Saderia to work out anyway, so he would just have to get through this day, then run away and never see Saderia or her stupid family again. ...Why did it have to hurt so much, though?

“Come on,” Saderia said, bringing him out of his thoughts. “Class is starting.”

“Right,” Dash muttered.

Saderia flicked him happily with her fluffy tail. “I can’t wait till school ends.”

“Me either,” Dash murmured, although he was really hoping that 2:30 would never come. Just seven hours stood between him and the eminent end of their friendship.

Dash groaned inwardly. He followed his best friend of at least seven more hours into the school building.

When lunch came, Loki joined Saderia and Dash at the lunch table with her usual grin. Dash thought of how great it would be to live Loki’s life right now. How nice it would be to have nothing to hide and to not care about anything anyone said or did to him. She really didn’t have anything to worry about as far as he knew and he felt suddenly jealous of her easy life. Then he felt bad, because Loki’s life probably wasn’t as perfect as it seemed and he was just being a jerk.

“So word’s going around that you’re going over to Saderia’s house,” Loki said to him with her haughty/friendly smile. “That should be interesting.”

It should, in a really sick, twisted way. If his father could see them, Dash was pretty sure *he*, at least, would be entertained. “Yeah, I guess it will be,” he muttered.

“Aw, don’t worry about it,” Loki told him. “The King and Queen are really nice, and they’re not like the uptight royalty everyone imagines. You’ll be welcomed.”

“Sure.”

“I talked to them once before and they seemed really cool. It’ll be great,” Loki assured him with a grin before she turned to Saderia and started a brief conversation about sports, the thing the cheetah liked the most.

While they were talking, Dash forced himself to just accept whatever was going to happen. Once Loki left to go back to her spot to eat her lunch, Saderia turned to him with a grin, thinking of all the things they could do when Dash came over. “My house has all these cool, secret rooms, like I told you in my story, remember? I can show you those and then I’ll show you my room. We can go outside to play in the woods around my house, then eat dinner and talk to Mom, Dad, Cia and Uncle Jash and then go play some more. It’ll be so cool! You’ll see.”

Dash winced painfully as he realized he would like to do all that with Saderia, but he knew he probably wouldn’t get the chance. The way he forced himself to smile enthusiastically at her and say, “That sounds awesome! I can’t wait!” was excruciating. He didn’t even know why he was going along with this and acting as if there was nothing wrong. Why didn’t he just come clean? Well, she would know soon enough...

At recess they played together on the big tower, sliding down the slides and racing across it, playing hide and seek towards the end. Then they went back to math and science and when that was over, they went to homeroom to pack up. Dash sat beside Saderia and Loki with his book bag packed and leaning against his desk.

Saderia was excited, and smiled at Dash and then at Loki, suddenly wondering if the cheetah felt bad. To her relief, Loki leaned over to her, and said, “Have fun with your friend. I’ll see you Monday.”

“Thanks, Loki,” Saderia replied happily.

Loki flicked her ears and smiled, but then her gaze turned mischievous. “Want to see me mess with the L’s?”

“What are you going to do?”

“Hey, I’m doing it for Lisa’s benefit. She needs to get away from them.” Speaking louder, she called to Lisa, “So, Lisa, are you walking back to our neighborhood with me today, or are you going to pretend to walk to one of those rich neighborhoods then dart away when L and L are gone?”

Lisa went pale while Lizzie and Lily blinked then stared at Lisa.

“You live in the same neighborhood as *Loki*?” Lizzie exclaimed.

“Isn’t that a poor neighborhood?” Lily asked disgustedly.

“I don’t know what she’s talking about,” Lisa said quickly, casting Loki a hurt glance.

“It’s for your own good,” Loki mouted to her, adding to L and L. “Of course she does; she’s a leopard, right?”

“I can’t believe it!” Lizzie exclaimed.

“It’s not true!” Lisa defended herself. “Just because I’m a leopard doesn’t mean I live with them!”

“She’s right, Loki’s just messing with us,” Lily agreed, giving Loki a hostile glance.

“Yeah, don’t listen to her,” Lisa agreed too quickly.

“Jerk,” Lizzie muttered to Loki, turning away from her.

Loki raised an eyebrow and laughed a little, while Saderia looked at her curiously.

“Is that really true: you live in the same neighborhood as Lisa?” she asked.

Loki nodded. “It’s true. She’s a leopard and I’m part leopard. Leopards have a tendency to stick together in one neighborhood. I just knew the L’s would freak out about it.”

“Wow,” Saderia said, surprised. Then she paused. “Was what Lily said true, too? Is it a...poor neighborhood?”

“You should know, *Princess*. Don’t you know all the neighborhoods?” Loki replied.

Saderia felt embarrassed. “I know about some of the forest, but not all of it.”

Loki just shrugged. “Geography’s not my best subject either. But yeah, I’m lower middle class, and so is Lisa even though she’ll never admit it to L and L. That a problem?”

“Of course not! I just didn’t know.”

“Whatever, I don’t really care. It doesn’t make much difference to me.”

Saderia felt a little bad about being so rich since she ruled the forest while her friend was, well, sort of poor apparently, but Loki’s attitude made her a bit happier.

“It’s not like it changes anything, right?” Loki asked.

“Definitely not,” Saderia replied. “You’re still a really cool friend.”

“Thanks. Now you go have fun with Dash.”

“I will. What are you going to do today?”

Loki grinned. “My brothers and I are going to have a whole bunch of competitions. The rest of the leopards and my Dad are going to join in and stuff.”

“That sounds fun!”

“It will be.”

Dash found himself watching them as an outsider, not a friend. Was this how it would be once he was out of the picture? He hoped so; Saderia deserved a friend like Loki.

Suddenly the announcements for the day came on and interrupted their conversation, ending by dismissing all the students.

“Well, I’ll see you later, Saderia,” Loki said, getting up. “Bye, Dash,” she added as she walked toward the door with the rest of the class.

“Bye, Loki,” Dash murmured.

Saderia stood cheerfully, hoisting her blue book bag over one shoulder. “Well, ready to go?”

“Sure,” Dash told her, forcing a smile. “I’ll just go throw my book bag in the woods really quick.”

“Okay, I’ll wait in the clearing by the school.”

The two of them walked down the crowded hallway together until they made it out the front door where it was less stuffy. Dash briskly hurried away in the direction of his clearing in the woods to put up his stuff. Once he got there and put his book bag in a tree hollow, he debated not going back, but he decided that he couldn’t hide from this forever and Saderia would be hurt and confused. So he started back toward the school with a resigned sigh.

He found Saderia waiting in the semi-empty clearing and tried not to get upset. She wouldn’t be waiting for him like that again. Smiling obviously, Saderia took him toward the dirt trail that led from the school to the town. From there she took the dirt path that led through the woods, with trees rising up on either side, to her house. Dash’s paws dragged as he walked beside her and he felt his anxiety rising every time he took a step closer to Saderia’s home.

Suddenly he saw the royal den appear within the shelter of the trees and his heart began to pound. He wondered how he was making his paws keep moving when he felt like he was made of ice.

“There’s my house,” Saderia said, speeding up. “Come on! I’ll go get Mom and Dad to come out!”

The King and Queen; Dash felt himself grow clammy and sweaty at the same time and his amber eyes narrowed in fear. He just barely managed to force himself to follow Saderia as she bounded up to her home.

Saderia ran ahead and entered her house, calling for Karenisha, Makero, Cia and Uncle Jash to hurriedly come outside to meet her friend. It was then that she realized she had never even told her family his name, as if some instinct inside her told her to wait. But that would be solved now, and she was excited about it.

Karenisha and Makero appeared first and followed their daughter as she led them outside, Cia and Uncle Jash falling into step behind them.

“Mom, Dad, Cia, Uncle Jash, I’d like you to meet my friend,” Saderia announced as she stepped outside, seeing Dash waiting a few paces away from the door.

Thoughts of running away at top speed filled Dash's mind and he felt an unexpected flash of anger when he saw Karenisha and Makero appear behind Saderia. But then he just felt scared and upset. Get on with it, he thought to himself.

Saderia led her family over to her dark brown friend and smiled encouragingly at him; Dash didn't even try to return the smile, looking instead at the King and Queen with fearful, but resigned amber eyes. He realized that he recognized them, although he had never seen them this close before. Karenisha looked like an older version of Saderia, and Makero looked the same way he remembered, but definitely happier and freer. He hadn't really seen Cia or Jash except once or twice from a distance, but they looked like what he would have imagined.

Saderia noticed with confusion that when Karenisha and Makero saw Dash, their eyes widened in shock, and maybe even disbelief, then narrowed, almost in anger or suspicion. Saderia didn't know what was going on, and frowned, saying hesitantly, "Mom, Dad...this is my friend from school."

Karenisha and Makero shared an alarmed, disbelieving glance with confusion shadowing her mother's amber and her father's green eyes. "Could it be...?" Karenisha whispered to Makero.

"He looks just like him," Makero whispered back, his voice thick with suspicion and shock.

Dash shrunk away from their penetrating gazes, knowing with a sinking sense of horror that they had recognized him. He closed his eyes for a moment before opening them again and staring at the King and Queen, reviewing the best way to escape.

Karenisha took a step forward so that she stood halfway between Saderia and Dash, a protective stance. "What's his name?" she growled to Saderia, her eyes narrowed and focused on Dash.

"Yes, what is it?" Makero asked, his voice sounding a little more disbelieving and his green eyes troubled.

Saderia hesitated, getting a really bad feeling about this and wondering why her parents were acting so strangely. "This is Dash," she murmured cautiously. "But...his real name is Dashenirus."

Makero let out a gasp along with Karenisha, who quickly followed it with a growl as she pushed herself between Saderia and Dash completely, glaring at the lion.

Dash shrunk away from their gazes. He almost wasn't sure what to feel as the strong emotions of horror and sorrow crashed over him, but also anger. He knew that they knew exactly who he was now, and his secret would be revealed in moments. He really didn't want to stick around for that, but he forced himself to stay in place, knowing that if he left now, Saderia would just follow him.

Saderia let out a little noise of surprise when she saw the utter shock, rage and pure hatred in her mother and father's eyes as they snarled at Dash. "What's going on?" she asked, her voice distressed. Her instincts were telling her that this was definitely something bad, something horrible, and she should brace herself; she did.

Karenisha turned to look at Saderia for a long moment, her amber eyes troubled and angry. Finally she turned to Dash with a look of sheer hatred. "He..." she spat out, unable to find the words in such rage.
"He's..."

"He's Dastarius's son," Makero growled grimly.

Saderia's amber eyes widened in utter shock and disbelief at the words and overall confusion blocked out every other thought. What? Dash...Dastarius's son?! She didn't know whether to believe it or not, because how could that possibly be true? What were the chances? She didn't know what to think or what to feel and all she could do was turn to Dash with a horrified, distressed expression and choke out, "Is...is that true?"

Dash looked down for a very long moment, closing his eyes to try to block out the sharp pain he was feeling, tasting salt in his mouth as he swallowed back a tide of tears. He looked up at them finally and hesitated a long moment, staring at Saderia for an immeasurable amount of time before he looked back down.

Staring at the ground, Dash finally muttered, "Yes. Dastarius is my father."

Chapter Twelve

The Secret Is Out

Saderia gasped, and Dash looked up at her with pleading eyes. “Just let me explain,” he begged. “I...”

“Get out of here,” Karenisha hissed, taking a threatening step toward him.

Dash shrunk away from her and took a few paces back, turning to look directly at Saderia with sad, scared amber eyes. Saderia avoided his gaze, not knowing what to do; why was he looking at her now after that confession? What did he expect her to do after he had just admitted that to everyone?

“Go!” Makero roared, showing his fangs threateningly.

Dash took another terrified step back but continued to stare at her. “Saderia?” he asked quietly, in a surprisingly steady voice.

Saderia looked back at him with wide, scared eyes, as betrayal clawed at her heart. How could this happen; how could it be true? But Dash had admitted it and now that Saderia thought about it, she could easily see the similarities between Dastarius and Dash: the dark brown fur, the amber eyes, and Dash’s mane was just a few shades lighter than Dastarius’s pitch black one.

He was still staring at her as if he expected her to say or do something to stand up for him, but what could she do? It was all happening too fast and she couldn’t think straight; she didn’t know what to do! She couldn’t bear to meet his gaze and see those suddenly scarily familiar amber eyes, so she immediately looked away. But she didn’t miss the flash of pain in his eerie eyes as she turned her back on him.

Ignoring Karenisha and Makero’s snarls, Dash forced himself to ask, “Saderia? Do you want me to leave?”

Saderia narrowed her eyes at a flash of pain, still refusing to look at him. “I...I can’t...” She closed her eyes. “I don’t know what to think, Dash. Just get out of here.”

Just get out of here... For a moment, despair threatened to overcome Dash and he felt like someone had just dumped a bucket of freezing water over him. He felt like he couldn’t breathe and all he could feel was pain. But he tried to keep himself together, reminding himself that this friendship was never supposed to last and he’d known this would happen. “Fine,” he growled, his voice emotionless. “I’ll leave. Bye, Saderia.”

He turned around slowly and stalked away from them, breaking into a run when he was far enough away from them not to be seen. He raced back to the safety of his woods, tears streaming down his face, despite his efforts to stop them.

Saderia stared after him, her feelings so jumbled up she wasn’t sure what to feel first, and so didn’t show any emotion. Karenisha turned to her then, her voice softer. “Saderia, are you okay?”

“Did he hurt you?” Cia added, her orange and black-striped fur bristling.

Saderia blinked uncomprehendingly at her aunt, and then at her mother. Dash...hurt her? “I’m fine,” she murmured, as if in a daze. Everything felt surreal and she wasn’t sure if she would ever pull out of this fog of shock and confusion.

“Are you sure?” Makero asked worriedly, walking over to his daughter.

She nodded. “Yeah, I’m...fine. I just...need some time alone. I’m going to my room,” she murmured, drifting toward the house uncertainly. The moment she reached her room and shut the door quietly behind her, it finally hit her, all at the same time, and she rushed to her bed as tears stained her cheeks.

First, there was an incredibly painful sense of betrayal that left a deep, gaping wound inside her; along with it came the realization that she had just lost her best friend and she cried harder into her pillow. *Dash is Dastarius’s son...* The thought was unbelievable at first but she knew it could be nothing but the truth when Dash himself had admitted it. And the

similarities she now saw between Dastarius and Dash were eerie and not easy to overlook.

Despair tugged at her, threatening to bring her down completely. Dash had been her best friend but now it was like he had terribly betrayed her. He was Dastarius's son... Was he looking for revenge after what Saderia and her family had done to his father? Had everything he had done with her all been an act? Dash had seemed so kind and sincere, but then, Dastarius had been a good actor, too.

How could her life go from amazing, where she had her family, a friend and a *best friend*, to this sadness and confusion she was feeling now? And another thing was deeply troubling her: what if she had assumed things too quickly? She had been shocked and horrified at learning about Dash's father, but what if he hadn't been planning anything and he really did just want to be her friend? But after what she had done to Dastarius, why would he want that? Still, she couldn't shake the fear that she had just destroyed one of the best friendships she had ever had by jumping to conclusions too quickly.

But with Dastarius's blood and dark influence, what reason did she have to think that Dash *wasn't* out to get her? She could probably think of a million reasons, actually, but she couldn't be sure that he *wasn't* just putting on an act all those times they were together. She shivered at the thought now, realizing that any of those times, he could have killed her because of his father. But he *hadn't*. Then again, it would be too obvious; it would be very clear that he was to blame if he killed her right then. Maybe he was just waiting for a chance to blame someone else, like Dastarius had planned to blame Cia and Uncle Jash for the murders of Karenisha, Makero and herself.

And how did her Dreams play into all this? They had been warning her of something and this seemed to be it. But hadn't they also been telling her that Dash was part of the prophecy, someone she could trust? Then she froze in horror. She had told him everything about the Dreams and the prophecy, and now she wasn't sure she should have done that. Shame and regret made her heart pound. Why had she revealed her family's secret when they had trusted her with it? At the same time, she realized she hadn't

revealed the location of Queen Tarae's tomb, or how to get inside, and let out a breath of relief.

Feeling only slightly more at ease, she thought back to her first Dream, remembering hearing the words of the prophecy whispering in her ears. Then she had seen Dastarius's dungeon, lit up by a flash of amber eyes. She had thought they were Dastarius's eyes, but now she wondered if it was Dash instead. And did that mean that he *was* plotting something, since she had seen the dungeon? She had also seen flashes from the past, in that Dream, and then Dastarius's last words: *This isn't over...*

Suddenly, Saderia shivered as she realized that maybe it *wasn't* over. If Dastarius's son was still around, then maybe Dash was thinking of avenging his father, and therefore it *wasn't* over yet. She had thought that as long as Dastarius was dead, his last words could hold no meaning, but maybe she was wrong.

But what about her second Dream? That was the one where Dash had walked beside her and made her feel more confident. At the end, she had thought that he was asking her for forgiveness, but at the time she didn't understand it. He could be asking her to forgive him for his father's horrible legacy, meaning he was the kind animal she had always seen him as, but she still couldn't be sure. And yet that Dream had convinced her that Dash was part of the prophecy with her, and that she could trust him with the royal family secret. But still...

The next Dream she'd had had been the one where she had been telling Dash about her past, then looked back and saw Dastarius in his place. Was that a hint? Then she had been running through the forest and had seen Dash's amber eyes in the bushes, but he had growled at her with undisguised hostility. Or had that been Dastarius? She was terrified to realize that she wasn't sure.

The Dream she had told Dash about had been one where she had felt betrayed then run through the woods when Dash ran away from her, only to see Dastarius step out of a bush where she thought Dash was. And then there was the last Dream she'd had before this horrible day had come, the one with the cruel laughter and then the light, snatched away and destroyed by a dark brown paw. Had that been Dastarius or Dash? Did it matter? She

didn't like the way it kept going back to Dastarius and Dash, making her think that they weren't that different and that maybe Dash did hate her and want revenge. Maybe she had just been too stupid to see it.

Her instincts had been warning her about Dash, but also pushing her toward him and she couldn't make any sense out of that. She felt like she couldn't trust her intuition anymore, and that hurt her deeply since she had always put so much faith in her instincts, knowing they were very powerful, like the prophecy and the Dreams. Karenisha had told her so, and she had believed it, but could that be untrue? Maybe she was just too dumb and mediocre to figure out her instincts and Dreams and that was the problem. She was finally certain that the prophecy had picked the wrong animal.

If Saderia was upset, then Dash was a wreck. Once he saw his clearing in the woods he raced toward it and half fell toward his sleeping place, shaking not with cold but with sadness and rage. Burying his face in his paws, he shouted, "Are you happy now, Dad? You ruined my whole life! The *one* chance I ever had and now it's destroyed because of *you*! Are you finally happy now?" He bit his lip and laid very still except for the violent shivers running through his body.

Just get out of here... Dash had known Saderia would turn on him once she found out the truth, that Dastarius was his father, but he hadn't expected it to hurt *this* much. He had tried to prepare himself for it but now he felt like someone had ripped a huge gash in him, leaving only a scar where his heart was supposed to be.

He had wanted to believe that Saderia would stick up for him or at least give him a chance to explain that he was nothing like Dastarius, but she hadn't even given him that. Apparently that was how much their friendship was worth. He missed her already but he was also steaming with anger that she had been so quick to turn on him. Why did everyone he met end up hating him?

He tore violently at the ground with his claws, leaving deep scars in the earth. "Stupid Princess! Why should I care anyway? She doesn't mean anything to me! All she did was turn on me, so I should turn on her! I hate her!" He was furious at her now and he liked to think he was starting to hate

her, but he knew it wouldn't last long. Scraping his claws along the bark of one of the trees beside him, he snarled, "I wish I had never met Saderia! She's just a stupid Princess anyway!"

Almost immediately, he felt horrible for saying it, even though there was no one around to hear. Saderia was probably right to turn on him, he decided, after all Dastarius had done. With a shiver of dread, he wondered if he were really that different from Dastarius. If he wasn't, it was no wonder she had turned on him. Had she realized then, when she knew the truth, that he was exactly like his father? After all, he definitely looked like Dastarius, so why shouldn't he act like him?

But even as the thought ran through his mind, he remembered all the horrible times when his father was alive. Dastarius had hated Dash from the moment he was born and he had made it pretty clear. He had all but thrown him out to die when he was growing up, hating Dash since he *wasn't* like him. Dash had refused to change for him and it wasn't too hard to guess where that got him. He remembered back when Dastarius had warned Dash to keep out of his business—namely, kidnapping Karenisha and Makero, and then Saderia and the rest of her family, then planning on killing them—and Dash had realized that Dastarius could kill him without even batting an eyelid.

Dash remembered that, throughout his life, he had been kept awake at night and tormented in the morning by more than Dastarius: guilt. He had believed he was just as bad as Dastarius since he couldn't help Karenisha and Makero when he knew they were suffering, and their family was in danger. But he had been too terrified of Dastarius to try anything, and besides that, he could never find out where the keys to the dungeon were. Dastarius had told him a million times before that if he interfered with his plans to take Saderia's royal family power, the Dreams, and then take over the throne, he would kill him. Painfully. And Dash had known the first time, without a doubt, that he meant it. Still, there had been times when he had crept through Dastarius's house, followed by fear, looking for the keys to free Karenisha and Makero. He never found them and it was hard to get up the courage to search with Dastarius around.

Most of the time he had stayed in his room, hoping that Dastarius would be too busy to come in, to try to convince Dash to be more like him,

and then torment him when he refused. Sometimes he hoped that *Dastarius* would change and actually come and talk to him like a normal father, or care about him, since he never had before. But he had always known that that would forever be nothing but a fantasy.

For the rest of the time, it had been maddening to watch *Dastarius* lie to the rest of the forest, making himself out to be such a good lion. It was particularly painful, knowing that the only thing those animals would have to do was take a trip to his house where Dash and the prisoners lived for them to see for themselves what a ‘nice guy’ *Dastarius* was.

Dash had listened in whenever *Dastarius* tormented *Karenisha* and *Makero* to get them to tell him about the secret and how to get into that tomb to get it. He’d run back to his room when it got really bad and the screams started. He respected the two tigers for standing up for themselves in such an excruciating situation, and when they were finally released by *Saderia* later on, he was glad.

But then, after *Karenisha* and *Makero* were freed, he had found out *Dastarius* was dead, when the Queen and King announced it to the forest and told everyone their story. *Dastarius* had hated Dash, but Dash could never return the hatred; it was hard to completely hate his own father. He had always hoped that there was something good in him, even though there probably wasn’t. And he did care about him no matter how hard things got, and how much he resented living there, having to watch *Karenisha* and *Makero* being tortured. Of course, he hated himself for caring about his father when it was clear how horrible he was.

What was worse was that, when he finally found out that *Dastarius* was dead, he had felt so righteously relieved. But then the guilt had set in. How could he be happy about anyone’s death, much less his own father’s?

After that, things hadn’t gotten much better. Dash had run away before *Dastarius* had died, but had watched him from the woods, seeing him capture *Saderia*, *Cia* and *Jash*. He had wanted to help them, so he watched the house even more closely, wondering if there was any way he could stop *Dastarius* from killing them. But after *Dastarius* died, there was really no going back and it just got colder and colder in the woods. Nothing went

right after that and he began to think Dastarius was right when he said that animals like Dash would only get stepped on and thrown aside.

Long ago, he had forced himself to not be like Dastarius or believe those words since he wanted to be a better animal, but after a while in the woods, with his father dead, he had begun to stop caring that much about it. That was when he had met Saderia.

It was so strange to cross paths with the Princess again, especially with Dastarius and his dark past still looming over his head. He had been relieved to see her alive and well, but also terrified that she would hate him and destroy him when she realized Dastarius was his father.

Well, now she had, and with a flash of despair, Dash realized that Dastarius really was right about him and what would happen to him all along. It wasn't hard to come to that conclusion, now that he had lost everything.

Late that night, there was a soft knock on the door to Saderia's room.

"What?" Saderia called, her voice stifled by the pillow she had buried her face into.

"It's me," came Karenisha's voice. "Can I come in?"

Saderia didn't answer, but after a long pause, the door opened and her mother came in anyway, sitting beside Saderia on the bed. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"Define okay," Saderia muttered into her pillow. She sat up, her amber eyes bright with tears. "I thought Dastarius was behind me, but now...I don't know what to think. I just...I feel so stupid. I don't even trust myself anymore. My intuition is so confusing and I don't even think *it* knows what to do or what's going on."

"Saderia, I'm sorry about what's happened. I know this must be hard for you." Karenisha gave her daughter a sad look. "But there was no way you could have known about this. You can't blame yourself. There will always be animals who like to hurt others and there's nothing you can do about it. I know you're upset, but you just have to get through it, and you should always trust yourself. Just be more careful."

“You don’t understand!” Saderia burst out. “There were a million ways I could have known! First of all, they look a lot alike! And my Dreams warned me every single night, and my instincts might have been confusing but a few times they did give me pretty clear warnings, or signs or...I just don’t know! I don’t understand any of this stuff! I wish I’d never heard about Dreams or Dastarius!”

“Saderia...”

Saderia turned away from her mother, burying her face in her pillow. “Go away. I don’t want to talk about it now.”

Karenisha placed her tail lightly on Saderia’s shoulder. “You’re not expected to understand it all so soon after learning about it. You have animals to help you. You could have talked to me about the Dreams, you know. I could have taken it.”

Saderia felt an extra flash of guilt on top of her sadness that she hadn’t even tried to talk to her mother about it, and she felt tears well up in her eyes again. “I’m—”

“You can talk to me now,” Karenisha interrupted her apology. “I might be able to help.”

Saderia wanted to tell her mother everything and hope that maybe she could make her feel better, but she didn’t think she was ready to tell Karenisha *everything*, including how she wondered if Dash *could* be trusted. She needed some time alone to work through things, including what she was going to do about Dash. “I don’t really need help,” she said. “I...I know the truth now. It just hurts, okay? I just need some time.”

Karenisha sighed, a distressed look on her face, but she got up and started toward the door. Saderia knew she wasn’t supposed to hear what the Queen muttered when she reached the door, but she heard it anyway.

“Maybe I *was* away from her too long,” Karenisha murmured, a pained look in her amber eyes.

Saderia sat up immediately, guilt making fresh tears come to her eyes. “Mom, I’m sorry. It’s just really hard to understand and I just need some time to think about what I need to do. I know you want to help me and protect me, but I want the same for you. I do feel like I can talk to you

even if we haven't seen each other for ten years, but it's just hard. You've already helped a lot and I just need to figure some things out on my own. I promise I'll talk to you if I need help."

Karenisha's amber eyes were relieved but still concerned. She gave Saderia a weak smile. "All right, I understand. You should come talk to me, though, if you need me."

"I will, I promise."

Karenisha paused. "What about...him? Do you think he'll come around again? Should we have him banished?"

"No," Saderia said quickly, maybe a little too quickly, knowing she meant Dash. "I don't think he'll show up. I'll tell you if he does, okay? I'll be careful and watch out for myself. I promise." Secretly she hoped that when she went back to school on Monday, Dash would be there, or hanging around in the woods somewhere, so she'd get a chance to talk to him and get his side of the story, once she had calmed down. She wasn't sure how she would be able to tell whether he was lying or not, but she hoped that maybe her instincts would be clearer then. And she wasn't about to tell Karenisha she was going to talk to Dastarius's son; she would never let her do it.

"All right. I'll be in the living room if you need me. I'll tell your father and Cia and Jash what you said."

"Thanks, Mom. I'll be all right; I just need time."

Karenisha gave her an encouraging but still worried smile. "I know you will. I love you, Saderia."

"I love you too, Mom."

Karenisha smiled slightly then turned slowly to walk out of the room, closing the door carefully behind her. Saderia stayed still for a long time, trying to calm herself down enough to work through this mess in her mind. Her Dreams and her instinct just might be able to help her if she really listened to them and thought them through. She wasn't about to just leave this as it was, and not try to find out the truth. The last time she had searched for the truth, she'd found her parents, after all, and she might just find something great in a huge disaster again.

Thinking through all the time she had spent with Dash, she tried to connect any of it to Dastarius or to some sort of desire for revenge on Dash's part. But eventually she fell asleep, only to have a Dream unfold in her mind the moment her head hit the pillow.

A few sheets of paper fluttered down through the darkness; Saderia couldn't make out what was written on them, just that it was written in red. Looking closer, she realized that the scarlet color on the paper wasn't ink but blood. The blood dripped off of the paper and into another scene where Saderia saw two blades of grass left standing in a ravaged land. The blood fell onto the grass but the blood didn't stain the blades of grass. It slid off of them into the churned up earth, leaving the grass their same, bright green color.

Suddenly, the Dream darkened and a moment later she was standing at the bottom of the stairs that led down into Dastarius's dungeon. She looked up the stairs to see Dastarius and Dash standing at the top of them. Dash was hunched over, staring at the ground, unable to meet Dastarius's gaze, while the dark lion glared at his son with a hard but unreadable expression.

Instantly, Dastarius's amber eyes flicked to her and he lifted his black-tipped tail, pointing at her. Dash looked up in her direction and gasped; Dastarius unsheathed his claws, then pushed Dash halfway down the stairs. The dark brown lion caught himself, now standing halfway down the staircase, caught between Saderia and Dastarius. Dash looked at Saderia then at Dastarius, indecision showing clearly in his amber gaze. Saderia never got to see which side he chose in the Dream because Dastarius suddenly disappeared and a moment later, a claw swiped at Dash from the darkness. With a gasp, the dark brown lion fell down the rest of the stairs, landing beside Saderia, a deep gash on his throat, dark blood pouring from the wound.

Horror rose nauseatingly in Saderia's throat and she felt sick to her stomach. But then she heard the sound of paw steps close to her, and claws flashed in the dim light. She looked up, expecting to see Dastarius, but it was dark and all she could see was the angry flash of cold blue eyes. Then the darkness swallowed the rest of the scene and Saderia was left gasping for breath as she awoke in her blue bed, the morning light shining through

her window. Birds sang their early morning songs outside, as if nothing at all had happened. Saderia sat up in her bed, breathing unevenly as she looked around slowly, wondering what the Dream meant. One thing was certain: she was definitely going to have to talk to Dash on Monday.

Sunday night wasn't a great time for Dash, who was pacing his clearing as the moon shone brightly in the night sky. He was trying to decide whether he should risk showing up at school the next day.

First of all, he didn't even know if Saderia would be there; after what had happened, her parents might not want to risk letting her out of their sight. And if she was, what made him think she'd listen to him if he tried to explain anyway? Also, if he showed his face in public, Karenisha and Makero would just find him and get rid of him or banish him to some unknown land. If he just stayed in his woods, he might be okay as far as safety.

But he wanted to at least try to explain to Saderia, without her parents around to influence what she said. She might not believe him after what had happened and she might still hate him but he at least wanted to try. He missed their friendship and the way someone had actually seen something good in him...at least until she found out about Dastarius being his father.

But if she did come, her parents probably wouldn't let her come alone. Dash hastily made a plan to wait in the woods and watch for her to come. Once her parents had left, he'd catch her alone and do everything it took to convince her that just because he had Dastarius's blood didn't mean he was anything like him.

On Monday morning, Saderia reviewed the things she thought her Dream had meant; she had been thinking all weekend about the Dream's meaning, and she had several ideas, but had no way to be sure about any of them. Nonetheless she wasn't going to just ignore this hint when it was presented to her, like she had done before.

She didn't know what the pieces of paper were yet, but she guessed that they might make sense later on. But the blood could mean different

things. The obvious interpretation would be killing and bloodshed, or blood lust, which could point to Dash because of Dastarius. But maybe not. It could also mean family, as in family bloodlines, as in Dastarius being Dash's father. She hadn't completely figured out the meaning of the two blades of grass, but she had some ideas.

The dungeon's meaning was clear in a way: Dash couldn't choose between his father and Saderia. But the end had been strange and she felt a shiver of horror as she recalled the bloody scene of Dash lying beside her, lifeless. She wasn't sure what it meant, but it was nothing good. She felt an unexpected urge to protect not only herself but Dash, too, even if she didn't know whether to trust him or not. The thought of Dash...dead...was horrifying.

Back to the blades of grass, Saderia would have liked to think that they somehow symbolized her friendship with Dash before everything had happened. If the blood meant bloodlines, then maybe the way the blood didn't stain the grass meant that Dastarius's evil legacy didn't affect Dash, and he could be trusted. But she wasn't entirely sure. What if the blood meant bloodshed like she'd originally thought? Maybe the blades of grass were herself and her family and that only together they could protect themselves against Dastarius's bloodstained past and Dash. Those were the only ideas she had and she longed for someone to talk it over with, but she didn't go to her parents. She remembered her Dream about Dash and how it had hinted that he would help her; maybe that was a good sign. But then again, maybe her Dream had been mistaken.

She padded out of her room to where her parents were waiting uncomfortably in the hall. "I'm ready to go to school," she announced.

"Are you sure you want to go?" Makero asked her cautiously. "After what happened..."

"I'm sure," Saderia told him firmly. "Let's go."

Karenisha and Makero exchanged a quick, anxiety-induced glance before turning to walk toward the door while Saderia fell into step behind them. They walked uneasily along the dirt path until they reached the school where they stopped in front of it.

“Are you sure?” Karenisha asked one last time. “You can come home, you know. With Dastarius’s son out there...it might not be safe.”

Saderia winced invisibly. “Thanks, Mom, but I’m sure. I can take care of myself, and I have tough friends here. I’ll see you guys in the afternoon.”

“Come get us if there’s any trouble,” Makero said nervously. They hesitated before walking down the dirt path, keeping their eyes on Saderia until they disappeared behind a wall of trees. Saderia stared at the spot where they had disappeared for a long time, wondering for the first time if she really *was* in danger. She had wondered if she could trust Dash or not, but she had never actually thought about him *hurting* her. The thought just didn’t fit.

Then she heard a rustling in the bushes behind her and whirled around to see Dash slip away from the brush. He froze when he saw her.

“Dash?” Saderia said, instantly wary. She hadn’t known if he would show up at all, but now she felt uncomfortable.

Dash felt uneasy, too, wondering if he could actually get up the nerve to go talk to her, and then try to explain. Suddenly he wondered how much *she* had felt betrayed, since she didn’t exactly know the whole story. He felt a wave of sympathy for her as he realized that her past was being dragged back to the surface just as much as his and she was probably just as upset about it. “Saderia?” he said cautiously, walking over to her gingerly.

Saderia couldn’t help but recall Dastarius and Dash standing at the top of the stairs, looking so closely alike it sent shivers down her spine. But she forced herself to keep her gaze calm as Dash padded over to her with a wary look in his amber eyes.

“What do you want?” Saderia asked uncertainly, hating the way it sounded when she said it.

Dash blinked in pain but held her gaze. “To talk. That is, if you’re not going to call the King and Queen to attack me.”

“I won’t call them,” Saderia said carefully. “Not unless you...” She trailed off, averting her eyes.

“What? Kill you?” His voice was a little colder with scorn, but he went on, “Just because Dastarius is my...father, do you have to distrust me so quickly?”

“What else am I supposed to think, Dash?” she asked quietly. “After what he did to my family...but you knew all that a long time ago, didn’t you?”

Dash winced and now he couldn’t meet her gaze. “Yeah,” he muttered. “I did know. But I had no part in that. If you’d just let me explain, then you might be able to understand.”

Saderia hesitated for a long moment, wondering if this was a lie or not. But she had come here to talk and she did want to hear Dash’s explanation to see if it made any sense. “Okay...” she said carefully. “I’m listening.”

Dash blinked with surprise, a flicker of hope lighting up his amber eyes. “Really?”

Saderia nodded slowly. “Go ahead.”

Dash took a deep breath and looked back toward the woods, trying to get his thoughts together as he thought about where he should start. “Dastarius hated me,” he began quietly. “I—”

But then he was interrupted by a horribly familiar voice. “Hey, Princess, we heard you had a fight with the loser.”

Dash let out a furious hiss of frustration as Lizzie and her groupies joined them, smirking at him and beaming at the Princess. Saderia seemed frustrated, too. “L’s,” she sighed, “this is definitely not the time. Could you please leave?”

Ignoring her entirely, Lizzie said, “We heard you finally realized what a loser this freak is”—she flicked her tail disgustedly at Dash—“and we thought you had finally come to your senses.”

Dash lashed his tail angrily. This was probably his only chance to make Saderia understand before something else happened to turn her against him even further. So he got furious. “Get out of here now!” he snarled at the L’s, pushing his way over to them to glare in Lizzie’s face, unintentionally unsheathing his claws. He had never felt this kind of

senseless rage before. “Why do you three morons always have to pick the worst times?”

Lizzie glared back at him, puffing out her fur angrily. “How dare you talk back to me like that, freak? You’re nothing but a worthless loser! I’m glad Saderia finally got smart enough to get away from you.”

He tore at the ground with his claws. “Just back off now,” he snarled, adding under his breath, “before I shred you to pieces.” He had really had enough of all of this.

Saderia’s tail flicked nervously back and forth. “I really think you should leave,” she murmured briskly to the L’s. “We’re having a conversation.”

Oblivious to her comment, Lizzie snapped at Dash, “I can’t believe you just threatened me, you loser.”

“Anyone would threaten you after putting up with your annoying stupidity for the whole year,” Dash retorted, wishing they would just go away and stop wasting the only time he had to get Saderia to see the truth.

Lizzie’s eyes widened. “I can’t believe you just threatened me and said that!”

Dash was about to reply, but then a deep voice came from a few paces away. “I can’t either.” Lizzie and the L’s and Dash looked up to see Principal Delaca looming just a few feet away from them, trotting closer; all the color drained from Dash’s face. “Why me?” he whispered too low for anyone to hear.

“All four of you: Lizzie, Lily, Lisa, and Dashenirus, to my office at once,” he barked.

Dash’s eyes widened in distress. “No!” he exclaimed. “I...I can’t!” Not when he had such limited time to talk to Saderia!

Mr. Delaca’s eyes narrowed. “Now. No excuses. I want to know what’s going on.”

“But—”

“Now!” The black panther’s yellow eyes were angry now, and Dash knew it would be no use arguing.

He turned to Saderia hopelessly, knowing that his chance was lost.
“Can you please talk to me at lunch?”

Saderia hesitated for a long moment, then finally nodded uncertainly. She wondered if she should stick up for Dash to Principal Delaca, but she couldn’t quite find the words for it, too busy thinking about how cold Dash had been to the L’s. They probably deserved it, but combined with his father’s bloodline, it disturbed her.

Dash sighed, staring at his paws in frustration for a brief moment. “Fine, I’ll see you then.” Somehow he doubted he would, even if she said she would talk to him. The moment was lost; he would probably have a much worse chance of trying to convince her later on. Then he realized how mean he had been to the L’s, and even though he had only done it because he was worried he would lose his chance to talk to Saderia and because he was fed up with their teasing, Saderia might not see it as that. She might see it as Dastarius’s evil blood finally showing in him. Furious now with himself, he stalked bitterly after Mr. Delaca with the L’s behind him, wishing he could just disappear, never to be seen or heard of again.

Once Dash had disappeared inside the building, Saderia sighed at the lost moment, but in her mind she couldn’t help wondering about Dash’s anger a moment ago, and whether Dastarius’s dark bloodline had anything to do with it.

Suddenly she felt her fur prickle with the uncomfortable sensation of being watched. She looked up to meet the ice blue eyes of Lolista. The lioness’s face was expressionless, except for amusement and something else, something darker.

“Lolista?” Saderia said uncertainly, stepping a little closer to her. “What are you doing here?” Had she heard any of her and Dash’s brief conversation...about Dastarius? “How long have you been here?”

“Not that long. I just came to see what was going on out here. Were you having fun with your little friends?” Her tone was almost sarcastic and her expression a little too knowing for Saderia to believe she was simply curious.

“Not really...” Saderia replied carefully, wondering why her instincts were screaming at her to get out of there and fast...and go to Dash.

“Did you and that lion friend of yours have a little *fight*?” Lolista said the word tauntingly, as if she were implying something else.

Saderia studied her closely. “You could say that.”

“Well. I’m sure you’ll figure out eventually whether you two can be *friends* again. It’ll probably work out soon.” Her tone was dark and almost mocking, as if she could sense Saderia’s pain and was laughing at her.

Saderia stared at her for a long time. “You sent the L’s over here, didn’t you?” she said when something in her mind clicked, probably her instinct.

“L’s?”

“That lioness, Lizzie, and her friends.”

Her ice blue eyes were cold and condescending. “I didn’t send them. But they might have heard me muttering about how two particular students, the Princess and the freak, were having a fight.”

Saderia stared at her for a long time, trying to figure out if she had meant to send them or not. But why would she do that, other than the fact that she seemed to like other animals’ pain and anger? Had she known that Dash had been trying to explain something and had purposely sent the L’s over there to stop that for some reason? It sounded so stupid as she thought it and she decided she must be paranoid.

Lolista’s eyes gleamed. “Did they interrupt something?”

“No, it’s okay,” Saderia mumbled. “We’re going to talk at lunch, so...” She trailed off, letting the sentence hang in the air.

“Then I hope you figure out what’s going on by then,” she said, her words sharp and almost certainly carrying a double meaning. Why did she say it like that? Suddenly the lioness narrowed her eyes at her, and her lips curled back almost in a snarl. “You know, you’re a pretty popular target, Princess,” she snarled, as if challenging her.

Saderia narrowed her amber eyes. What was *that* supposed to mean? “Why do you say that?”

“I think you’ll find out.” Suddenly her ice blue eyes were flaming, fire on ice. “Get out of my sight. Now.”

Saderia was taken aback by her icy, hateful tone and scurried back a few paces, her eyes wide with surprise. She quickly whirled around and headed toward the school doors, not wanting to be late for class and not willing to be anywhere around Lolista.

When lunchtime finally arrived, Saderia wasn't sure whether she should listen to what Dash would have to say or not, and whether to trust him or distrust him. Nothing was making sense to her and she wished she wouldn't have to go it alone, but it seemed inevitable. At the end of math and science, Ms. Zanah pulled her aside with a concerned expression, preventing her from leaving with the other students.

"It was obvious you weren't paying much attention in class today," the white tiger teacher told her, sounding very much like her old tutors until she added in a caring tone, "You seemed upset about something. Is everything all right?"

No. "Yeah, everything's fine, Ms. Zanah," Saderia murmured, her voice distant-sounding. "Just some stuff I have to think about. I'm sorry; I'll pay more attention in the future."

"All right." Ms. Zanah still sounded concerned but she let her go. When Saderia got back to her homeroom, it was empty since everyone had already gone to lunch. She walked over to her book bag and began pulling her lunch bag out of it when she spotted a strange piece of paper out of the corner of her eye. It was angled toward Dash's book bag, as if it had fallen out of the poorly mended hole in the bottom; it was torn.

Feeling a strange, almost premonition-like sensation prick uncomfortably at her paws, she stepped toward the paper uneasily, hooking it with one claw and holding it up to her face to read. Something appeared to be written in Dash's handwriting, or at least, it kind of looked like the writing she had seen in his notebooks before. But when she looked over the paper, she swallowed as horror churned her belly, feeling a lump in her throat that prevented her from swallowing, bringing salt into her mouth.

A lot of the paper was cut off, torn away for some reason, but from the first part of it she could easily tell it was a plan; a revenge plan.

'First I'll make the Princess trust me, so she won't suspect anything. I'll make her think we're the best of friends, and then when we've been 'friends' for a while, I'll start to tear her away from her family. Finally she'll turn on them, and then I'll be able to avenge my father and kill—'

A large chunk of it was torn out, probably more details for the horrible plot, but the first part already gave her enough to know exactly what was going on. It definitely looked like Dash's handwriting, although she got a strange feeling about it. But that didn't matter because the meaning was very clear: Dash had been lying to her the whole time, just to get revenge. All of the fun times they had had together had been nothing but lies perpetrated to get her to trust him just so he could hurt her.

Chapter Thirteen

Traitor

Saderia felt like crying or ripping the paper into shreds so there would be no evidence, then make herself forget what she had just seen so that she could go on thinking Dash was the great animal she had always believed he was. But she couldn't do that, much as she wanted to; the thought that her best friend had been lying to her and had never meant any of the nice things he had said to her hurt worse than she would have ever imagined.

She told herself she couldn't just lose it here at school, although holding back a tidal wave of tears made her feel like she was going to explode. Somehow she had to make it through this day, and then she could let it out when she got home. But not with her parents around; she wasn't ready to face them with this new evidence against Dash. They would surely banish him from the forest to live as an outlaw, or maybe even kill him, and she couldn't let that happen even with the evidence right there. Something inside her told her to keep quiet and she had no problem listening; she still wanted to care about Dash, even if he had never cared about her.

She briskly grabbed her lunch bag and hurried toward the cafeteria, struggling to keep a hold on herself so that she didn't let anyone, namely Dash, see just how upset she was. By the time she reached the lunchroom, she had managed to push her feelings away so that she only had to struggle against them a little, just enough to keep them from surfacing.

When she walked through the doors to the lunchroom, the normal, collective chatter of the students greeted her. She almost let out a humorless laugh at the way things could be so normal for everyone else when she felt like her whole life had been flipped upside down. Without saying a word, she padded over to her lunch table, doing her best not to look at Dash, who was sitting in their usual spot, watching her. As calmly as she could, she walked over to the table and sat beside Loki, but not too close.

“Hi, Saderia,” Loki called pointedly. “You know, if you want to talk, you don’t have to sit so far away like I’m diseased.”

Saderia sighed, scooting closer to her and feeling embarrassed. “I’m sorry, Loki. I just didn’t know if you’d want to talk or not.”

“Hey, you’re my friend. We can hang out sometimes, though you usually sit with Dash.”

Saderia winced.

Loki gave her a knowing look, her green eyes bright with sympathy. “Did you two have a fight? The L’s are spreading it all around the school,” she added disgustedly.

Saderia sighed, putting her head between her paws. “Wonderful.”

“Are you okay? Do you want me to go smack some sense into him, or the L’s, or somebody?”

“No, Loki, that’s okay. It’s just something I have to think about by myself.”

“Okay, I won’t butt in, but if you need my help or you want to talk or something, I’m here.”

“Thanks, Loki.”

Loki paused, then rested her spotted tail on Saderia’s shoulders. “Do you just want to eat and not talk? Do you just want a friend nearby?”

Saderia blinked, grateful for her understanding. “Yes, thank you.”

Loki just shrugged. “What are friends for? I’ll tell you what, I’ll throw in a bonus: I’ll ward off the L’s and Grath and any other vulture that comes over here.”

“You’re the best.”

Loki grinned. “I know.”

“Saderia?”

Saderia jumped slightly and looked up to see Dash hovering over her awkwardly. She narrowed her eyes though it made her feel even worse. “What are you doing here?” she growled. “What do you want?”

Dash winced visibly at her harsh tone. Just as he had thought, now she probably didn’t want to talk to him and his last chance to save their

friendship was going to be a failure. Feeling worthless and wretched, he looked down and just muttered, “I...I thought we were going to talk at lunch.”

“That was before. I don’t want to hear anymore of your lies now,” she spat, feeling tears rise in her eyes, though she blinked them away.

Pain flashed in Dash’s amber eyes. “I haven’t been lying to you. I’m not going to lie to you.”

“Yeah right. Just get out of here, and never talk to me again. I know the truth now.”

Dash felt like melting onto the floor and crying but he held himself together; despair made his paws suddenly feel tired and weary and his belly churned with distress. “Why won’t you give me one chance to explain?” he asked in a voice just barely above a whisper.

“Why should I listen to you?”

He paused for a very long time, not sure whether he should say something and even if he should, whether he should say it with Loki right there.

“Exactly,” Saderia went on, taking his silence as a lack of being able to come up with a valid reason rather than a hesitation. “If you want me to ever trust you again, you’re going to have to prove it, and I don’t think you can.”

Hopelessness threatened to overtake him so he just turned away, muttering, “Fine,” as he retreated back to his spot, as far away from her as possible.

Saderia turned back around to see Loki staring at her, curiosity clear in her green eyes. She glanced at Dash as he walked away, a question written on her face, but she just shrugged. “You can tell me if you want, but I won’t ask.”

Saderia felt relieved, not willing to explain it all to someone who didn’t know all her family’s secrets. “Thanks, Loki. It’s just complicated.”

“Complicated and none of my business. Now eat, and we can play together at recess since apparently you have a disagreement with Dash right now.”

“That’s nice,” Saderia murmured, chewing on her tasteless lunch.

“I’m sure it’ll work out for you soon.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Not.

Dash had long since disappeared by the time Karenisha and Makero arrived up to pick Saderia up. As they were walking along the dirt path, Karenisha asked grimly, “Any sign of Dastarius’s son?”

Saderia hesitated...and then shook her head. “No, haven’t seen him all day.” She didn’t know why she was protecting him when there was no reason, especially since he was probably out to get her, but something just told her to keep quiet. Besides, she didn’t like the way her parents were calling him ‘Dastarius’s son’ as if he didn’t have a name or a personality or anything, kind of like how the others classified her as ‘the Princess.’ Even though there was probably good reason for Dash’s label, it still bothered her.

“Good,” Makero said. “Maybe we can finally put this behind us.”

“Maybe,” Saderia murmured, glancing back at the school, and stopping for a second when she thought she saw the gleam of amber eyes watching her from the bushes. But they were gone in an instant and she wondered if she was seeing things, then turned and followed her parents to the house.

For the rest of the day, Saderia and her family tried to get back into their old habit, trying to leave their past behind them, and spending the rest of the day having fun. Saderia *did* have a good time with her family, but she felt bad about it since it seemed like everything else was so horrible at the moment. Then her father came in, right before she went to bed.

“How are you doing?” he asked her gently.

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I mean, I know about Dastarius and his...son, now, but it’s still so hard to believe. I just...don’t know what to think.”

“Everyone has to get through hard times; you just have to look forward and get past it.”

“But I trusted him! And I just...I don’t know.” Saderia let out a long breath, looking down.

“You trusted him,” Makero said gently, quietly. “...Just like your mother and I trusted Dastarius?”

“I guess.”

“It’s not a bad thing to trust somebody and just because this happened doesn’t mean you should distrust everyone. And you don’t have to hate him, you know. Did you have some fun times with him, when you didn’t know about...his father?”

Saderia looked away, murmuring quietly, “Yeah.”

“Well, you can think about those times, if you want, if it helps you get past it. You can think of him that way and maybe it’ll make it easier. I know you’re hurt, but I also know you like to see the good in everyone. You can do the same with...Dash.”

It was kind of weird for her parents to use her nickname for him, which she wasn’t ready to give up since it did remind her of their fun times, but she smiled at him, knowing he was trying to cheer her up. “Thanks, Dad. I guess you do understand, then. Thanks for the advice.”

“No problem. Anything else?”

“Can you tell Mom I’m sorry I didn’t talk to her before? I was just confused, but now I’m starting to realize some things. It’ll be easier to talk to her and to you now.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” Makero replied gently. “But I’ll tell her that you’re doing okay and you want to talk to her soon.”

“Thanks. There is something else, too. I still want to trust Dash; he was a great friend before I found out...but it was just an act, I guess. Still, I kind of feel sorry for him. I mean...imagine having Dastarius for a father.”

Makero laid his tail gently over her shoulders. “No one can control how you feel. And maybe it’s best to see the good in animals and to see both sides of the story...though sometimes it might get you in trouble. Like I said, you can think of him the way you want but sometimes you just have to let it go. You can’t help everyone, especially those who don’t want to be helped or can’t be helped.”

Saderia sighed. "You're probably right, but I can't exactly agree with you either."

He gave her a kind smile. "I know. You should get some sleep now."

"Okay. Goodnight, Dad."

"Goodnight, Saderia."

Dash paced his clearing as the night dragged on, unable to sleep. He knew there was probably no way to convince Saderia that he wasn't like his father anymore, not unless he dragged up the past all over again, and even then he wasn't sure if she'd believe him. After all, Dastarius had a million tricks to get others to trust him, so why shouldn't Saderia think he was the same way?

Finally he flopped down on his sleeping place, feeling the lifeless trees closing in on him again, instead of sheltering him. He was right back where he had started from, struggling with his past and his secret, only now the secret was exposed and he had lost the best friend he had ever had. Eventually he had to stop trying and stop caring, he told himself, realizing that he was nearly there. He was probably stupid to have thought that he could have a better life now that his father was dead and that he could leave his past behind. Wistful thinking; there was no way his father would stop haunting his paw steps.

Nonetheless, the next morning he got to class way before Saderia and everyone else and promptly wrote a note, then slipped it into Saderia's desk, pushing it far back in fear that, if she did find it, she wouldn't believe what it said and would be even angrier at him for trying to fool her. But he hoped that sometime she might find it and know that he was actually telling her the truth. Hopefully it would be sooner rather than later.

On Tuesday, Saderia mainly avoided Dash, although he occasionally came over to try to talk to her during the day. Eventually he just stopped trying and stayed away from her, too, hoping that she'd find his note soon, but simultaneously hoping against it. But was it even possible for her to distrust him even more than she already did? He still didn't know what he had done to get her this suspicious, what exactly had made her think he was

so untrustworthy. Monday morning she had been about to listen to him, but by lunch she was avoiding him like she hated him. What exactly had happened between morning and lunch?

Saderia, on the other hand, was taking Makero's advice and trying to stay away from Dash, while at the same time letting herself remember the fun times they used to have. It hurt, though, when she reminded herself that those times would never be again. Somehow she managed to get through the day even with Dash there, by forcing herself not to get upset and to move on. When she finally went home, she said nothing to her parents' about Dash's continuing presence at school, letting them believe he was gone.

By the time night fell, Saderia was beginning to feel better, thinking she might be able to put this behind her and get through it. She still missed Dash, but she had talked to her mother that afternoon and recalled something she had said: *The noblest Queen will see the greatest hardship, and will survive it.* This was just something she'd have to overcome, for her family's sake as well as the forest's. She still didn't know whether she should tell her parents about Dash showing up, but he didn't seem to be doing anything now that his plan was ruined, so she could probably just forget about it. Now that she knew everything, she would be able to get through this and expect no more surprises from this part of her life. Or so she thought.

Dash wasn't happy about it, but he knew that he had to forget about Saderia and just go back to square one where he had been trying to have a better life and be a better animal than Dastarius. It didn't seem like Saderia was telling her parents about him being there at school, for whatever reason, so maybe he could just put this all behind him and go on with his life. If the King and Queen weren't going to kill him, he might as well make the most of it and move on, forgetting about Saderia.

The good times they had spent together weren't easily forgettable and it filled Dash with sadness. It shouldn't be that hard to move on. It shouldn't be, but it was.

Saderia seemed to have halfway forgiven him and wasn't exactly being cold to him, just ignoring him and not wanting to hang around him. Maybe she didn't think of him like Dastarius, meaning he didn't act like him. That would at least help him get through it, and he entered the school with resignation but also a tiny bit of confidence. Saderia ignored him the whole time and he didn't try to talk to her, just going on with his day normally and telling himself over and over again that he had to stop wishing for their fun times to come back.

He had almost begun to accept the loss of the friendship and start to recover by the time school was almost over. But that all ended when he walked back into Ms. Spot's classroom after recess, just ahead of everyone else. He noticed that a piece of paper had fallen out of Saderia's desk and stupidly felt his hopes rise. He thought it might have been the note he left in the desk and now he could nonchalantly give it to Saderia, saying it fell out of her desk. Then she would notice it, read it, and then there would be a slight chance that she could forgive him and they could become friends again.

He was an idiot, but extremely hopeful as he went over to pick up the paper. When he noticed it wasn't his note, he felt disappointed, but then he noticed it was written in Saderia's handwriting, or at least it roughly looked like her handwriting. Curious, he started to read it and for a moment it was like everything stopped.

'I found out that Dash is actually Dastarius's son! Now that I think about it, he always has acted strange and it really explains things. Now I realize that he acts just like Dastarius, and he's probably out to get me for revenge or something. Well, his father ruined my life, so I'll ruin his. I'll let him think everything's okay for a while, but then, when he least suspects it, I'll tell Mom he's here and get rid of him. And he does act just like his evil father.'

Then there was a list of reasons against him that she would probably tell the Queen about; Dash didn't bother to read the rest of it.

For a moment, Dash felt hollow, but then fury nearly turned his vision red. He tore the paper to shreds with his claws then stalked out just as Saderia walked toward the classroom, the rest of the class behind her.

Dash didn't think about what he was doing; he just felt so stupid and worthless, and his mind was racing as he wondered if he really was just like his father. "What exactly did I ever do to you?" he snarled at Saderia as she came closer.

Saderia froze, knowing that something bad was about to happen. She took a step closer to Dash, instantly suspicious and a little angry. "What do you mean by that?"

Dash glared at her. "What did I do to you? Fine, so my Dad's Dastarius!" he shouted, ignoring the gasps of shock from behind Saderia, meaning the rest of the two classes had very clearly heard what he'd just said, and all of them knew what Dastarius had done from what Karenisha and Makero had told the forest when they had come back. "But what did *I* ever do to make you hate me so much?" he demanded.

Saderia's amber eyes flicked to the two classes behind her; she was shocked that Dash had just shouted that. And why was he doing this, especially right here in front of everyone? What did he expect to gain from it when she already knew the truth? "Why'd you just say that to everyone?" she hissed, narrowing her eyes.

"Because it apparently doesn't matter, considering you're planning on ruining what's left of my life!" Dash hissed back at her. "What do I care if they know? You and your stupid parents will just tell them anyway. And since I'm 'just like Dastarius' I guess they should be warned, don't you think?"

"What are you talking about?" she exclaimed. His amber eyes were narrowed with fury but she could also sense deep pain and hurting. "Why are you arguing with me now?"

"Just tell me what I did to get you so mad at me!" he exclaimed.

Saderia shot a glance over her shoulder at the two classes that were standing stock-still, staring at them in shock. "Dash," she hissed quietly, "I know about your plan."

“What?!” He narrowed his eyes, frowning but still glaring. What was she talking about? “What plan?”

“The one you made to get revenge on me. I saw it,” Saderia hissed.

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about! I never made any plan!”

Saderia frowned. Why was he denying it? “I found it by your book bag,” she snapped. “You can’t hide it anymore! Why are you fighting with me now, anyway? Our whole class is right over there, you know.”

“I know, I’m not blind. What’s the matter? Annoyed that you didn’t get to tell them yourself?”

“Where are you getting this from?” she demanded.

“As if you don’t know,” he snapped back at her. “Your stupid little plan! I found the paper by your desk in your handwriting! You’re the one plotting against me!”

“What?!” Saderia was stunned. “I don’t have any plan! I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Look who’s denying it now,” he hissed back at her. “Look, I don’t care what you say you found. Did I ever actually do anything? No! All I wanted was to be your friend but the minute you found out about Dastarius, you turned on me!”

“What else was I supposed to think?” Saderia hissed back at him, really angry now because his words were hitting her hard, making her wish she could believe them. “Especially now that I know your friendship was all just a stupid act! All you did was fool me—just like your father!”

Dash flinched and glared at her. “So you do think that!”

“Now I do!”

“Why, just because I got a little mad that you’re going to destroy my life?!”

“Why would I need to?! You’re doing a pretty good job on your own!” she shouted. “I wasn’t going to do anything! I thought that since your stupid *plan* was ruined, everything would be okay! But maybe I was wrong!”

Dash shook his head, a growl rumbling in his throat. “Here you are, hating me just because you found out about my father, when you hate it when everyone else labels you because of your heritage!”

Saderia flinched, narrowing her eyes. “Don’t compare that! This is completely different!”

Dash’s claws scraped the floor in frustration. “Sure it is, Princess! What you say is law, right?”

“Just get off my back!” Saderia exclaimed. “I know what you were planning and now you’ve basically proven it, too! Why should I trust you when I know you’re plotting against me? It isn’t because of your father, it’s because of the evidence!”

“I don’t know what evidence there is, considering I don’t have a plan! And it *is* about my father!” Dash lashed his tail. “If it wasn’t, then you wouldn’t have been so quick to distrust me! If you didn’t let it ruin everything, then you wouldn’t hate me and make up stories about finding some plan that doesn’t even exist! It is because of Dastarius that you’re avoiding me!”

“If you wanted me to *understand* and if you really are such a great animal, you could have said something earlier!” Saderia retorted.

“Oh, sure! What was I supposed to say? ‘By the way, Saderia, my father was the one who tried to kill you and your whole family?!’”

“If you weren’t planning anything, then why did you become friends with me in the first place?” Saderia replied, her fur bristling. “It was all nothing but an act and I know it, so why don’t you just give up already?”

“Maybe I became your friend because I thought you were the only one who could ever understand my messed up past, because you’re a great animal!” He let out a humorless laugh. “Apparently I was wrong about that! You’re the traitor, not me!”

“How dare you call me a traitor?! I never did anything to you; you’re the one that’s plotting against me!” Saderia exclaimed, lashing her tail furiously.

Dash hissed. “Fine, think that if you want! I don’t care anymore! But I’m not going to stick around and wait for you and your parents to

come kill me!" Without another word, he pushed past Saderia and raced down the hallway, running toward the front door.

Saderia's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. "Dash, where are you going?!"

"What do you care?" he shouted back, turning around the corner.

"Dash, get back here!" Ms. Spot commanded, looking very pale and confused, seeming not to know what she should do. The rest of the class was standing absolutely still.

There was no reply from Dash, and Saderia charged after him, into the atrium and then out the door, making it outside just in time to see Dash's dark brown tail disappear into the woods. Saderia raced after him but by the time she was in the woods, he was gone.

"Saderia, Dash, get back in the school *now!*"

Saderia heard Ms. Spot's voice coming from the entrance to the school and she quickly looked around for Dash once more, but she knew he would be long gone by now. Stifling a flash of pain, she walked slowly out of the woods and up the steps to the school where Ms. Spot was waiting. The teacher's face had drained of color and her moss green eyes looked distressed and confused.

"Where's...Dash?" Ms. Spot asked, her voice higher with shock and confusion. She gazed out into the woods with a horrified expression.

"Gone," Saderia murmured, feeling equally shocked by what had just happened as she stared at the spot where Dash had disappeared.

"Where's he gone?" Ms. Spot demanded.

"I don't know." Something told Saderia that he wasn't going back to his clearing in the woods, except maybe to pick up his stuff. It would be too easy to follow him there since she knew where it was, and he probably knew that.

Ms. Spot turned to Saderia with an utterly baffled and stunned expression. "What was that all about? What did he say about...?"

Saderia just shook her head. "It's a lot to explain."

Ms. Spot was silent for a long time; Saderia knew this all must be extremely overwhelming to her. "Dash is...Dastarius's son?" she asked

finally. “Everyone heard something about him when your parents came back but...Is that true?”

Saderia hesitated, then just sighed and stared at her paws. “I can’t talk about this now. Just let him go; it won’t do any good to go after him.”

“But...are you sure?”

“Yes. He lives in the woods anyway, so there’s not much that can be done. His...father is dead, his mother is gone...there’s probably nothing we can do.” Saderia continued to stare at the woods with a sad expression even as she said it. She told herself she shouldn’t listen to what Dash had said, but she couldn’t help but let it get to her. She wondered if he had been right, and if she had somehow made a mistake.

But it was probably just another act, she reminded herself, knowing she had no reason to trust him now. She did feel sorry for him and her paws longed to follow him to try to help, but there was nothing she could do. She would just have to let it go. But even as she told herself she had to forget about Dash, she had a really bad feeling, a feeling that told her that Dash would not be coming back.

Ms. Spot seemed about to say something but then just shook her head. “I don’t know what’s going on at all, but you’re probably right about not being able to do anything. But I can’t just let him go.”

“He’s long gone by now,” Saderia replied.

Ms. Spot sighed. “You’re probably right, and he *is* an orphan so...I suppose I’ll have to talk to him when he comes in tomorrow.”

Saderia stared at her teacher for a long time. “Sure, Ms. Spot,” she said quietly, knowing that she wouldn’t be able to do that since Dash wouldn’t show up tomorrow.

Ms. Spot gave her a long look, as if she understood the meaning in Saderia’s words, her gaze sad and confused. But then she turned around and walked briskly back to the hall while Saderia ran after her. Saderia cast one last glance back at the woods before the door closed behind her.

By the time they got back to the two classes, anxious and shocked murmuring had broken out amongst the students. Loki was the first to step out of the crowd and up to Ms. Spot, demanding, “Where’s Dash?”

“He...had to leave for a while,” Ms. Spot said evasively, the look on her face clearly saying: *Help me!* “Don’t worry about it; it’s no concern for any of you. School will just continue as usual.”

“How can you go on acting like everything’s so normal when it’s obviously not?” Loki retorted. “Where is he? And what did he say about... his father?”

“It’s not for you to worry about,” Ms. Spot snapped, narrowing her moss green eyes. “I thought I could count on you, of all animals, Loki, to mind your own business.”

“Not when something like this happens,” Loki retorted. “Not when someone I care about might be hurt. I thought I could count on you, of all animals, Ms. Spot, to tell us what’s going on and to look out for the others.”

Ms. Spot winced and shot a pleading look at Saderia, who quickly stepped up to Loki. “Dash is fine,” she told her firmly. “It’s too complicated to explain, and it really isn’t for anybody to worry about. We’re just caught up in a very complicated fight, all right. I promise you, he’s fine, and I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t worry about it and get the others even more freaked out.”

Loki gave her a long look. “We’re talking after school,” she hissed, narrowing her green eyes. She turned back around to face the students. “All right, nothing to see here! Just royal business or something...who cares! There was just a slight emergency, that’s all, but nothing big! Come on, all of you back to class or you’ll have me to answer to!”

All of them exchanged glances but then started moving back to class, grumbling the whole way and whispering about what had just happened. Ms. Spot, Saderia and Loki returned to class and the poor teacher tried to resume teaching and act as if nothing had happened, but no one was paying any attention and she was obviously just as stunned as everyone else. Thankfully, school was soon over, but when all the other students filed out of the room, Loki cornered Saderia.

“I don’t like to butt in where I’m not wanted, but you better tell me what’s going on,” Loki snapped.

Saderia sighed. “I know. I know you’re concerned, Loki, but it’s really, *really* complicated. I don’t really know what to say...” She took a

deep breath. “In a way, it is royal business, but Dash and I are just having a huge disagreement about something. I thought it had worked out and it wasn’t going to come up again but apparently I was wrong. I think Dash is fine, or at least he’ll be all right, but I can’t go looking for him and neither can any of us. I don’t even know where he is by now. I’m sorry if you’re confused but...” She trailed off, staring at her paws.

Loki looked down, too. “Are you okay?” she said at last.

Saderia paused. “I guess I will be.”

“And Dash is going to be okay?”

“I think so.”

“But he’s not coming back, is he?” Loki looked up, her green eyes serious.

Saderia hesitated again. “I doubt it.”

Loki was silent for a long time. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I don’t want anybody hurt...”

“It’ll be fine, Loki. Dash just isn’t going to be around anymore. But he’ll probably be okay.”

Loki sighed, her green eyes focused on her paws. Suddenly they flicked up at Saderia. “You know, that was a pretty vicious fight you two had.”

Saderia flinched and looked away. “I know. I didn’t want to say any of those things but I just...it got way out of hand. I really wish it had never happened.” She still wondered what Dash had been talking about, and if he had been telling the truth.

Loki blinked a few times then just shook her head and started toward the door, saying, “I don’t think any less of you or Dash. Just tell me if you hear about where Dash went.”

“I will.” Gathering her book bag onto one shoulder, she followed a distance behind her friend as the two exited the school. Loki walked off down the dirt trail while Saderia went to her parents in the now empty clearing, who were still waiting for her.

“What kept you?” Karenisha inquired.

Saderia shrugged, feeling a little dazed. “I just wanted to talk to Loki for a while.”

“Is everything all right?” Makero asked her, noticing her despondent tone.

Saderia closed her eyes. “Yeah, everything’s fine.”

The next day, Thursday, proved what Saderia already knew: that Dash wasn’t coming back. Given the circumstances yesterday and his absence today, she knew that she would probably never see him again. The thought made her heart sink with sadness, although it was irrational; he was a traitor.

It was hard to go through the day, knowing she would never see Dash ever again, and remembering that her last words to him had been angry ones. He might have deserved it, but she still felt bad. Loki gave her curious looks but she let her hang out with her, neither of them saying a thing.

As the day dragged on, Saderia made herself come to terms with the fact that Dash was gone, even if she missed him. She should be glad; after all, now that he was gone, she knew that Dash couldn’t hurt her, wasn’t hurt, and this episode in her life was behind her. If she didn’t see him every day, she might be able to finally forget him and his father and the bittersweet memories Dash’s presence inflicted. Even if it hurt. She could go on with her normal life, staying friends with Loki and hanging out with her family, focusing on Queen training and the prophecy and other things, and make it seem like Dash had never come into her life. He had betrayed her, so she shouldn’t give another thought to forgetting about him and moving on. She shouldn’t, but she did.

As the hours dragged by, she thought about the fun times they’d had and how she wished things had turned out differently. If Dash had just left his father’s evil legacy behind, they could have been friends. It probably would have been a little rough at first when she had found out, but it might have been able to work. With a pang of sorrow, she remembered how she had thought he would be the one to help her work out the prophecy and her Dreams. Maybe he could have been, had it not been for Dastarius’s dark

shadow. Before, she would have trusted him with her life and her secrets, but now she knew she couldn't...much as she wanted to.

She let herself envision a future where the two of them were friends again, inseparable, able to face anything together, without the past coming back to haunt them. Dash would be the nice, caring animal she had thought he was and they would be able to overcome the past together. But that could never be a reality and it was time she realized that.

In the afternoon, she walked home by herself since her parents had told her the night before that if she thought all was safe, she could walk alone again. She was grateful for the solitude.

The next night, she had a Dream where she was running alone in a dark forest, seeing amber eyes glowing in practically every bush she passed, but never knowing if it were Dash or Dastarius. And then she felt a flash of terror when she saw blue eyes staring at her from a bush directly in front of her. Suddenly Dash was beside her, growling at whatever was in the bushes. "Run," he ordered. "I'll stay here." It went dark, but then there was a sharp hiss of pain, either from herself or Dash; she couldn't tell. Then, when the darkness disappeared, she saw blood pouring over her paws, a scarlet river through the forest. Horrified, she looked to the side and saw Dash lying in a pool of his own blood. At first she thought he was dead but then he looked up at her, a sad smile on his face, then laid his head back down, resting, not dying.

When she woke up, the premonition of danger was strong, but a spark of happiness flowed through her for one single instant. Then she was frustrated with herself; why couldn't she just forget about Dash and leave him in the past? It would help if she could stop Dreaming about him!

By the time she got to school, she had made up her mind to leave Dash and his father's plot in the past. If she really put her mind to it, maybe she could force herself to stop having Dreams with Dash in them. She was so focused on putting Dash out of her mind, she didn't catch the obvious warning her Dream carried.

By the end of recess, she had made up her mind that Dash was better off forgotten. She had convinced herself that he was a traitor and she was better off with him gone now. The rest of the school was still a little shell-

shocked from what had happened, but they were making themselves carry on with normal life, as if nothing had happened, since the teachers encouraged it. Only Loki remained worried, though she didn't show it in front of the others, asking Saderia for any news about Dash only when they were alone. But if the rest of the school could forget about the dark brown lion, then so could she.

She was fully convinced that she had to stop thinking about Dash since he was a traitor, with only bad intentions and lies for her, by the time she got back to her homeroom at the end of the day.

"I also want to add an extra assignment for homework," Ms. Spot announced as the class grabbed their book bags and slouched back in their seats. The whole class groaned, except for Saderia, who felt a little grateful, since homework might help to distract her mind, like it had back when Cia and Uncle Jash were raising her.

Ms. Spot went on to assign a few workbook pages and the students began searching around in their desks for the workbook. Saderia unzipped her book bag and then began to look around in her messy desk, realizing unhappily that it was probably crammed somewhere in the very back.

Her paw shuffled through other workbooks and textbooks but then she froze when she felt the crinkle of a folded piece of paper. For some reason, it sent an electric jolt through her paw and up her leg, making bells go off in her head, urging her to take the paper. It must have been her instinct, Saderia realized, but what was it telling her? Uncertainly, she hooked a claw in the strange piece of paper and yanked it out of her crowded desk. It was a normal piece of paper, folded several times, but when she opened it, her eyes grew huge as she realized that it was not just any piece of paper. It said:

Don't go back! Too many guards! They're safe! Go to an old cabin in the woods far west of Dastarius's house for help. It's covered by vines and hidden behind trees, but it's by a tree struck by lightning. You have the wrong keys. The right keys are in the cabin.

Stunned, Saderia realized it was the note that had helped her back when she was trying to save her parents from Dastarius. With a mixed, growing sense of shock, horror and understanding, she began to realize what this was and that she had been horribly, horribly wrong. At the bottom of the note, it read:

Is that proof enough for you?

It was signed:

Dash

Chapter Fourteen

False Accusations

“I have to go!” Saderia exclaimed, jumping out of her seat and racing for the door. She didn’t even bother to take anything with her, except the note she kept clutched firmly in her paw.

“Saderia! Where are you going?” Ms. Spot demanded. “It’s not time to leave yet!”

Behind her, she heard Grath burst out, “Everybody keeps leaving for no reason and they get away with it! Why can’t I?”

“It’s important!” Saderia exclaimed, not bothering to elaborate or wait for Ms. Spot’s reply. She yanked the door open and bolted down the hallway, racing out the school’s front door, with her heart pounding in her chest.

She knew she had made a terrible mistake. The note was undoubtedly written in Dash’s handwriting, which she now recognized as the same handwriting as the animal that had helped her save her parents. The note had led her to the kidnapped kids in an old cabin where the actual keys for Dastarius’s dungeon cells were. He must have been the one who had helped her escape from the dungeon, too, she realized. If Dash had helped her save herself and her parents before, than he really was just trying to be her friend. He really didn’t want to hurt her. She couldn’t explain away the ‘plan’ she had found, but somehow someone must have been setting her up or something.

Dash hadn’t been putting on an act and he really was the nice animal Saderia had always thought he was. *She* was the traitor, not him. She was the one who had turned on him when he really hadn’t done anything and hadn’t been planning on doing anything. She had just messed up the best friendship she had ever had. Why hadn’t Dash just told her about the note when he had the chance? She knew the answer almost immediately: Because she wouldn’t listen, because she might not have believed him.

With a feeling of horror, she realized that she had been wrong the whole time. Dash was right when he'd said she'd jumped to conclusions too quickly and mistrusted him just because of who his father was. If it wasn't for Dastarius's bad blood, she would've been more inclined to listen to him. But his father didn't really matter, now that she thought about it, not if Dash was the kind animal she knew he was. He was strong enough to get past Dastarius's dark influence to be the nice lion she knew, and she had probably just destroyed that.

She remembered what he had said in the dungeon when he'd helped her escape: *He'll kill me if he finds out, but I want to help you.* Dastarius was just evil enough to kill his own son, especially if he messed up his plans. Dash had risked his life for her and her family. It made sense now that she thought about it: Dash was Dastarius's son, so he would know about the plan, the dungeon, the escape route, the keys and everything, though she didn't know the exact details. Dastarius's son would know the house and would be able to get in to help her. And then he must have followed her when she had escaped the dungeon to leave her that note, and he hadn't told Dastarius where she was. Dash had betrayed his own father, knowing he would kill Dash if he interfered, just to do the right thing and help her out.

Saderia raced down the steps and through the woods, not thinking about anything but finding her friend and apologizing. She wanted to find out about his past and give him another chance if he would give her one. She didn't know how she would do it, but she desperately needed to find Dash! She was so caught up in her guilt-ridden, anxious thoughts that she didn't notice the cold, ice blue eyes that followed her as she raced into the woods.

Dash paced the tiny new clearing he had come to when he had run away from Saderia and the school. He had stopped by his original clearing to take some of his things, but then just kept on running, hoping Saderia and her family wouldn't find him. Thinking back to his fight with Saderia, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt, wishing he had never said those things, but he was sick of being hated: by his father, his classmates, and now the entire royal family.

For the past two days, he had been hiding away in the woods, feeling sorry for himself, which did no good. He missed the time he had spent with Saderia and the way she had seemed to care and understand him better than anyone. She had been so friendly and helpful, but she had turned on him the moment one thing went wrong. But he still cared about Saderia; he could never hate her. The feelings apparently weren't mutual, though, so he had to force himself to forget about her.

As he paced, he started thinking about his mother again, since he wasn't sure whether she hated him or not. She could have had a good reason to leave long ago that didn't involve him. Maybe she tried to help Saderia's family, too, and Dastarius had threatened to kill *her* for it. Like him, maybe she had run away to protect herself. Maybe she still missed the son that she had to leave behind. Something told him that that was unlikely, but he clung to the hope that maybe there was still some animal out there who hadn't been turned against him.

But how was he ever supposed to find his mother? How would he ever know if she was nice, and if she had cared about him when she had left so long ago? Well, he knew one way to find out if she ever did care, but that involved going back to a place he'd made himself swear never to go back to. But what did it matter now? He should probably go back there anyway just to get some food, since he was going to have to live out in the woods forever, maybe even on the run. But most of all, he wanted to see if there were any clues about who his mother was; Dash didn't even know her name.

After all that had happened, he decided he really didn't care anymore, so without another thought, Dash started walking in a direction that would lead him to Dastarius's house.

After a few minutes of walking, Dash finally stepped into a small clearing with a large house sitting among the surrounding trees. In a way, it looked just like he remembered it: creepy and evil. But the windows were dirty now and the house was beginning to be overtaken by vines and creepers. The door was still wide open, probably anchored in place by an overgrowth of clinging vines. The roof was covered with leaves and there were a few holes in it made by the trees overhead scraping against it and wearing down the slates.

When Dash walked through the door, it was eerily dark except for where a few patches of light shown through the holes in the roof. Leaves, dirt and twigs littered the floor and covered the furniture, which was soaked and ruined from any rain shower that might have occurred before. Some pieces of the roof had chipped and fallen to the ground and the floor was gritty and uncomfortable. He heard a soft squeaking somewhere and the gentle rustle of the leaves and other debris in the house, and guessed that rats had made this their new home. How fitting.

The living room was wrecked and the dining room across from it was dull and destroyed, along with the kitchen down the hall. He decided to look in Dastarius's room first, to see if he could find anything about his mother, and padded down the hall to the first door. He had to shove the door open roughly since it was stuck and hard to open, the hinges way past rusted. Once inside, he quickly looked through the room but there was nothing he could find in there. Next he pushed open the door to the closet in Dastarius's room.

He checked around the closet but all he could find were Dastarius's faded blueprints for the dungeon and then papers with his evil plan to kidnap Saderia and her family. Everything else was useless and he leaned heavily against the back wall in frustration. Apparently a little too heavily, because the wall made a thud and a second later Dash jumped as something fell past his face and landed a few feet away from him. He looked up and noticed for the first time that there was a shelf near the ceiling, right in the wall.

Then he padded toward the things that had fallen and saw that they were a thin book and a picture. Glancing at the picture, he saw his father standing in front of a newer version of the house Dash was in now. Dastarius had his usual sneer on his face, the closest thing he had to a smile. But beside him was a bright, cream-colored lioness. Dash knew instantly who he was looking at and his heart began to pound as he studied the picture of his mother, looking for any signs of compassion. But the lioness's eyes were the coldest blue he had ever seen. Her features were sharp, and the knowing smirk on her face looked almost mocking. She didn't resemble the mental image Dash would have liked to have of his mother.

Dash turned away from the picture and flipped open the first page of the little book that he now realized was a journal. It was thin and there appeared to be only three entries; the rest of it seemed to have been torn out. He quickly realized that the writing in the journal must be his mother's. It read:

Dastarius says he's going to take over the throne and get rid of Karenisha and Makero. Well, it's a nice dream, but I don't see how he's going to do that. He says he's got a good plan, which I doubt, since he's such an idiot, but maybe it'll work. We'll see. But I want that stupid tiger Queen off the throne; she's too dumb to do anything right.

Dastarius keeps talking about some weird royal secret or something, but I really don't care about that. The only thing that really matters to me is that the King and Queen are dead, and we rule the forest. He can worry about the how-to part.

The rest of the page was torn or disintegrated by mold and time, and he flipped to the next page, feeling his heart sink and his tail droop with sadness and disappointment. His mother didn't care at all.

*Well, so far this is working out **horribly**. Not only has Dastarius **not** taken over the throne and eliminated K&M, but now I'm stuck with a kid, too. This is not the life I envisioned. Dastarius is just as annoyed as I am, but what are we going to do now? The kid—Dashenirus—has already been born. What do I want with a kid and a normal, domestic, married life? That sounds incredibly boring! I'm really thinking about leaving Dastarius and his stupid kid behind because this is just becoming a nuisance. Dastarius is a failure and the kid's worthless—why would I want to be tied down to such a pitiful 'family'?*

Dash bit his lip to keep from crying or screaming. So much for his hope of having a decent mother who cared. Dash's mother, whoever she was, didn't care about him at all; if anything, he was just an annoying nuisance to her and she probably resented him for that. He sighed, trying to

fight back a feeling that could be sadness or anger—he couldn't tell which it was. There was one last entry:

Well, this turned out as I should have guessed: in failure. Maybe I should have listened to my parents when they said not to marry Dastarius. Oh, well, I guess I found out the hard way what a failure he is. I really could have told him that he'd end up looking like a moron if he just asked K&M for the throne. I mean, does it get any stupider than that? Oh, sure, the King and Queen will just hand over part of their forest. Idiot. It was so humiliating when he just asked K&M at one of their royal meeting things. He was humiliated, of course, and therefore so was I, since I stay with him. Well, I'm fixing that. I'm sick of having to get along with and put up with this jerk. I either have to put up with Dastarius ranting about K&M and his doomed-to-failure plans or I'm stuck taking care of the kid, who's so annoying and going to turn out to be just as much of a failure as Dastarius, maybe more. I'm sick of this life. I won't miss the kid at all, and I won't give another thought to Dastarius, even though he does kind of grow on you in a really disturbing way. I'm leaving.

Sighing, Dash looked up from the book, letting his temper cool with acceptance. Even though he had wished for a caring mother, he had somehow known that that wouldn't be a reality. He had just needed to make sure, since he had never known or heard about his apathetic mother; Dastarius had never said a word about her.

But he didn't feel like leaving quite yet; he still had to see if there was any food left or anything he wanted to take from his old home. He decided he'd probably go to his old room—through the big doors on the end of the hall, past the room that held the entrance to the dungeon and then to the right where there was a room, his room—and see if there was anything left in there he might want. But first, he glanced back down at the book, seeing something at the bottom of the page. It was a signature; he finally knew his mother's name.

Saderia raced through the forest, first at a high speed but then slowing down when she realized that charging off into the woods would get

her lost. She trotted through the undergrowth, having no idea where Dash had gone and feeling threatened by despair and hopelessness. She had to find Dash; she couldn't just leave it like this when she had made such a terrible mistake.

Trying desperately to tap into her instincts, she closed her eyes for a moment, trying to picture where Dash was. She didn't know how she could possibly find him, even with her instincts, but then she remembered that time when she had gone to Karenisha's Meadow with her parents, and had begun to sense what Dash was feeling. Maybe she would be able to do that again, and from that she could get a sense of where he was.

Concentrating on what she imagined Dash must be feeling, she continued to fast walk through the woods, hissing in frustration when she still didn't know where Dash was. But then, almost instantly, it was like she was transported to another place. Fear and dread pricked at her paws as she stepped through something gritty. It was dark. Waves of sadness and disappointment washed over her, but then it was over, just as soon as it had started.

Saderia blinked as she returned to her current situation, but her paws went faster, as if they knew where to go and her mind just hadn't caught up yet. She hoped her instincts were finally telling her the right thing, because it seemed as if Dash really needed someone to cheer him up.

As she ran, she thought about all that had happened and how horribly wrong she had been. Dastarius and Dash must not have had too much to do with each other if Dash had gone behind his back to save her, she realized. But then she had just turned on him instantly, without giving him a chance. With a sharp pang of guilt, she realized how badly she must have hurt him. Dash had always been nice to her, just a little afraid, but that was probably because he didn't want her to know about Dastarius. It definitely explained some of the things he had done and the way he had acted strangely sometimes. Now she wanted more than ever to find him and apologize. She briefly wondered how she would explain that to her parents, but they were very understanding and once she told them about Dash's involvement in their freedom, they would apologize, too. But what if she didn't find Dash?

Pushing a flash of alarm to the back of her mind, she once again thought about her Dreams and how they had all tied into it, now that she knew the rest of the story. Altogether, she had had seven Dreams, all of them mostly confusing and hard to understand. But now that she had some insight, maybe she would be able to make more sense out of them.

Her first Dream, where she had seen amber eyes in the dungeon, now made her think that it must have been Dash, but he was there to help her, not hurt her. And then the last part: 'This isn't over' probably wasn't a warning, just a hint. Because it wasn't over; she hadn't known the whole story then.

The second Dream was the only one she had probably gotten right the first time: that Dash was there to help her out and stand by her through anything. But after she found out about Dastarius, she had all but forgotten that Dream.

In the third Dream, she had only felt betrayed in it because the Dream was telling her how she would feel when she found out, and it was probably warning her not to react too quickly. The rest of it was probably hints, as well, telling her of how suspicious she would be. And the only reason Dash growled at her at the end was because she was the traitor for deserting him the moment she found out about his parentage. He was probably just trying to defend himself.

The fourth Dream had basically been warning her and giving her hints again, but it had also tried to tell her that Dash would run away. Then, in the fifth Dream, she had been in a dark place and the one light she had seen had been snatched away. She decided it could have been Dastarius who'd taken it. Or it could have been Dash, since he did have a good reason to hate her now, after what she'd done.

The last two Dreams were still a little confusing and she realized with irritation that she still didn't have the whole story if she couldn't understand them. But the two blades of grass must have been her and Dash, and the blood could have meant a bloodline—Dastarius's bloodline. But it would've meant that it wouldn't destroy them. That gave her hope that maybe she could fix her mistake.

In that same Dream, when she had been in the dungeon and seen the indecision in Dash's eyes as he tried to choose between Dastarius and herself, she could understand that he'd feel that way, and it was just something she'd have to accept. But she still didn't know about the end where...she shivered suddenly and froze for a moment. Dash had been hurt in the Dream; did that mean something bad would happen to him now?

Picking up her pace, she raced through the woods, hoping her paws were carrying her in the right direction, a new urgency making her heart pound. She hoped she could get to Dash before anything happened to him. But what could happen to him...and would she cause it? Her heart skipped a beat, but she kept running, hoping that wouldn't happen. But in case it did, she badly needed to get to her friend.

As she ran, she let her mind drift to the last Dream, a Dream she didn't understand yet. None of it made sense to her, except that maybe the part where Dash had growled at the eerie blue eyes in the bushes and told her to run meant that he would help her again somehow. Then the part about the blood, all of Dash's blood pooling around him...it was too creepy to think about. She didn't want to let herself wonder if something bad had happened to Dash before she could find him.

“Dash!” she called, her voice echoing strangely through the silent woods as her paws rustled through the undergrowth. “I’m sorry! I have to talk to you! Please tell me where you are! Dash!”

Suddenly she halted and jerked her head in the direction of a rustling in some of the thicker bushes just a few feet away from her. Whatever was making it rustle like that was too big to be a bird or a squirrel and hope swelled in her chest. “Dash?” she called. But as soon as she said it, there was a scraping sound and the bushes shivered once more before they went still, the rustling moving away from her.

Warning bells went off in her head, but she thought they must mean that she had found Dash, but he was running from her. It must be him! Determination filled her paws with strength as she darted after him, hoping she could catch him and he would give her a chance to explain how wrong she had been.

But no matter how fast she ran, she couldn't catch him. The rustling bushes were always several feet in front of her, hard to see through the trees. She was led in many strange directions, but she guessed that he was just trying to lose her so she ran faster, the woods becoming a blur to her vision as she swerved to avoid trees and prickly bushes. She was led around and around in odd circles, and was probably going deeper and deeper into the woods, but she paid no attention to where she was being led. She took the loud warning bells ringing in her head as a sign that she should go faster, before he got away, and she sped up again, going at top speed now. By the time she reached a small, grassy clearing, her legs were sore and tired and she was panting.

She stopped in the clearing because now the rustling had gone and she couldn't see anything. She looked around in all directions, desperately trying to find him again, but she couldn't see or hear anything, except the song of a lonely bird. She hissed with frustration that she had lost him, but then, when she looked around, a new horror turned her paws to ice and her heart began to beat furiously. She didn't know where she was. She was lost. And Karenisha and Makero had no idea where she was; they were waiting at home for her to come back from school.

Her instinctual feelings only added to the fear. She tried to turn the terror into mere frustration that it would take her a bit longer to find her way home, but her heart didn't stop pounding. She tried in vain to remember all the turns she had taken, but she had been going so fast she hadn't been able to pay attention. Not to mention, she had been led in so many different ways she couldn't ever hope to figure it out, even if she had gone as slow as a tortoise. She began debating which direction she should try, but she didn't even know which direction she had come from since the surroundings in this clearing all looked the same. She was completely and utterly lost; fear made her lightheaded.

She was just about to pick a direction and hope for the best when she heard sounds in the bushes behind her and whirled around, hoping to see Dash. Then she blinked in utter bewilderment when a bright lioness stepped out of the bushes.

“Lolista?” she exclaimed in surprise. “What are you doing out here?”

Lolista was giving Saderia her usual knowing smile, but this time it was like she was sneering at her, mocking her more than normal. Unease made Saderia wary and the warning ring in her head grew more obvious and urgent, feeling like a migraine.

“I could ask the same of you, Princess,” she replied in a voice as icy as her cold, blue eyes. “Looking for your poor, traitor friend?”

Saderia bristled. “Dash is not a traitor.” How would she know about that anyway?

“Apparently that’s not what you thought,” Lolista replied, stepping closer to her. Saderia instinctively took a step back.

“Well, I was wrong.” She tipped her head to one side, frowning. “How do you know about that?”

“Let’s just say I have my ways, Princess.” Lolista took another step toward her. “All this time you thought you were chasing ‘Dash,’ didn’t you?”

Saderia’s mind clouded with confusion and suspicion. “I don’t understand. What...what do you mean? I was trying to catch him so I could apologize.” She was still wondering what Lolista was doing out here, and it was really starting to scare her.

Lolista sighed, as if Saderia was as insignificant and stupid as a speck of dust. “Idiot. That was me.”

Saderia blinked in shock. “You? What were you doing out here?”

Lolista smiled. “I was trying to lead you away from the rest of the forest, and get you lost.”

“Wh-what? Why would you want to do that?”

“You really are dense, Princess.” Lolista’s tone was maddeningly scornful. “Haven’t you figured anything out?”

Unable to answer any other way, Saderia just shook her head.

Lolista just rolled her eyes. “Completely ignorant and stupid. See, that’s the problem with you Princesses. You depend on your pathetic title for everything, and go around acting like you’re all that. Until something bad comes along, and then you’re completely clueless and helpless. Pity, I

thought you were different. I thought I'd at least have a bit of a challenge. I was hoping that it wouldn't be this easy."

Indignation drowned out Saderia's confusion for the moment. "I am nothing like that!" she exclaimed. "I can't help it if I'm a little confused when you come out of nowhere and start talking in riddles! What am I supposed to think?" She glared, but then her bewilderment returned. "What exactly are you doing out here? Are you going to tell me or not?"

"Well, how about this?" Lolista hissed cruelly. "I'll make it a little easier on your stupid Princess mind and not go into too many hard, scary details. I think this will be clear enough."

One moment Lolista was snarling at her in a cruel, contemptuous voice, but the next she was leaping at Saderia with her claws outstretched. Saderia let out a yelp of surprise as Lolista's claws scored her side. She managed to wiggle away from the lioness and attempt to run away, but Lolista immediately came after her.

"What are you doing?" Saderia shouted, trying to dodge away from her. But the lioness instantly cut in front of her and barred her path, bringing her paws down on Saderia's to anchor her in place. Shocked horror made Saderia's mind go numb. Lolista threw her paws out from under her and pushed her to the ground, despite her automatic resistance.

Lolista grinned down at her. "Let's see. I could rip your throat out right now and be done with this, but that was a little too fast and boring. Is this really the best you can do, Princess?"

Saderia snapped out of her fog and kicked Lolista away from her with her hind paws, using all of the strength she possessed, because she knew her life depended on it. Lolista fell away from her but recovered and picked herself up with terrifying speed. She raced at Saderia again, a crazy gleam in her ice blue eyes. Saderia ducked away from her, knowing she had to fight even though shock still edged her mind. What was going on?!

When Lolista lunged at her again, Saderia ducked. Then she rolled around to score her claws across Lolista's belly as she flew over her. When Lolista landed, her eyes were glinting with fury, but also excitement.

"So you finally decided to fight back!" Lolista snarled, keeping low to the ground this time as she ran at Saderia, trying to trip her up.

Saderia jumped up, dodging away from Lolista's sharp claws, and then pounced at the lioness. But Lolista caught her in the lunge, digging her claws into her shoulders and belly before throwing her away. The force of Lolista's throw knocked the breath out of her and she let out a gasp of pain as she fell against a tree, its sharp branches digging into her back.

Saderia slumped to the ground and tried to pick herself up but she wasn't fast enough. In an instant, Lolista was on top of her again, raking her claws across her forehead to temporarily blind her with her own blood. Saderia let out a sharp hiss as she was thrown on her side and her white belly was ripped open with razor-sharp claws. She quickly rolled away, clearing the blood from her vision, and charged toward Lolista, desperately trying to get a hit in. If she could only stun her for a moment, maybe she could escape.

But the lioness just dodged to one side and Saderia skidded to a halt before she ran into a very prickly bush. She whirled around, certain that Lolista was about to grab her, and saw that she was right behind her. Saderia reacted defensively, swinging her paw around to claw her. But Lolista grabbed her paw and instantly yanked it toward her, causing Saderia to stumble forward with a cry, her body twisting painfully. Lolista turned her paw around and shoved it to the ground with more force than Saderia would have thought was possible for her lithe body.

Saderia let out a screech of agony as her leg hit the ground at the wrong angle and make a sharp but small crack. Lolista held her down for a moment, then let go of her badly twisted paw. Gasping in pain, Saderia pulled her leg back and stumbled away from her. Her leg wasn't broken but it was throbbing with intense pain and she was scared to walk on it or fight with it. Blood trickled from where her leg must have hit a sharp twig lying on the ground. Saderia looked up at Lolista, who was sitting calmly away from her, a sneer on her face. Still panting, Saderia's amber eyes narrowed with fear and pain. "Why?" she choked out. "Why are you doing this to me?"

Lolista's eyes gleamed. "Revenge," she hissed in a cruel whisper. She got to her paws and started toward Saderia, this time at a slower pace than before. In that instant, Saderia let herself hope that maybe she had tired

Lolista out just enough so that she could get away. She then dodged away from her, rushing toward the woods in a desperate attempt to flee.

She made it to the edge of the clearing, running at the fastest speed she could manage with only three usable legs. She didn't look back and for a moment, she began to think she had outrun Lolista. But almost instantaneously, the bright lioness jumped in front of her and Saderia let out a cry of surprise. She stumbled backward, causing her injured leg to throb.

Lolista forced her back into the clearing before she jumped up and over her. Saderia couldn't turn around quick enough, and, before she knew what was happening, Lolista had thrown her paws out from under her. With an alarmed squeak, Saderia fell to the ground where Lolista jumped on top of her, pinning her down with a cruel, satisfied smile.

"Well, that was fun. Time for you to die now," she said in a mockingly nonchalant voice.

"You're crazy!" Saderia shouted, struggling painfully but to no avail. "Why are you doing this?!"

Almost oblivious to her comment, Lolista just grinned at her. "Do you want to hear my plan? Come on, before you die. You ought to at least know that you destroyed yourself!"

"Why do you have a plan against me at all?" Saderia shouted. "What did I do to you?" She kicked at Lolista with her back paws, making her stumble away. Saderia struggled to get up and then tried to dart away, but Lolista was too quick. She jumped in front of her, forcing her back down again with an angry snarl.

"Stop trying, Princess," she hissed. Back to her cold, mocking tone, she snarled, "But anyway, where was I? Oh yes. Well, truth be told, I didn't really have a plan at first. When I found out you would be going to normal school, I had no idea what I could do. I just took the chance to go there myself, hoping that I could somehow get you. And it always helps to hide in plain sight too; such an interesting trick."

"What are you talking about?" Saderia gasped. "What does this have to do with anything? I never did anything to you, so why are you doing this?!"

“Oh, didn’t you? But, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted...”

“You’re trying to kill me!” Saderia protested in disbelief, struggling fiercely in the lioness’s strong hold.

“I guess you’ve got a point there,” Lolista admitted grudgingly. “But back to my story, I was trying to figure out how to get my revenge on you and eliminate you, when that lion—‘Dash’ as you call him—came along and you two became friends. Well, that definitely made me mad, but then I thought about the advantages.”

“What does Dash have to do with this?” Saderia demanded, her eyes wide with terror. Had she done something to Dash? What in the world was going on anyway?

“I thought about how shocked and distrustful you would be when you found out that his father was Dastarius,” Lolista told her coldly, ignoring her and her vain attempts to free herself from her grasp. “And that gave me a great idea.” She sunk her claws into Saderia’s shoulders.

Saderia winced in pain but stared up at her with shock and growing horror. “How do you know who Dash’s father is?” she whispered.

“Because,” Lolista sneered at her triumphantly, mockingly, “I’m Dash’s mother.”

Chapter Fifteen

Hard Decisions

Saderia's eyes were wide. "What?!"

"You heard right, Princess," Lolista hissed. "Your little friend happens to be not only Dastarius's son, but also mine. He has great family, don't you think?"

Saderia said nothing.

"Well, come on. This was your own fault, Princess. What are the chances that you'd pick to be 'friends' with the one animal who has the most psychopathic parents, not to mention genetics?" Lolista let out a cruel laugh. "Do you like pain, or something?"

Again, Saderia said nothing, her mind numb with shock. She had learned a while back that Dash had never known his mother, that she'd left long ago and had nothing to do with Dash or his father after that; Dash had been brought up by Dastarius. Now she was back, and she was just as bad as Dastarius, maybe even worse! Seeing the crazed, triumphant look in the lioness's eyes, she felt cold with horror. Her last Dreams finally made a little sense; Lolista had ice blue eyes like the ones in her Dream, and she was going to destroy everything.

"But...but why are you doing this to me?" Saderia whispered. "I thought you left Dastarius and Dash. Why do you want revenge?"

Lolista let her up and Saderia debated running, but she knew Lolista would just catch her, so she just stood there, ready to fight back if she had to. "Well," Lolista told her. "I've never really liked the royal family. Let's just say that I come from a rich family that wasn't too happy when they went broke right after Karenisha and I had a little fight."

Saderia's eyes widened. "My Mom wouldn't do something like that."

“She might not have. That was back in high school and she wasn’t Queen then anyway. But I’ve never really liked Princesses and so I’d made it my hobby to fight with Karenisha all the time. Then when the economy got hit pretty hard and my stupid aristocrat family went broke, of course they all blamed me for angering the current King and Queen. So I got disinherited, disowned...all that good stuff. Your Mommy found me a while later but of course she wouldn’t help at all and the next thing I knew, half the forest was turned against me because of some weird rumor she must have started.

“On the bright side, I learned to fight really well after that, as you can definitely see.” She sneered at her. “And I did like Dastarius; I just got sick of him. So you killing him was the icing on the cake. I never really did like Dashenirus, but the fact that you stole my son and brought him over to your side kind of hurt my pride, so that fueled the fire, too.”

Saderia shook her head in disgust. “You’re sick. You are the most disgusting animal I have ever met.”

Lolista narrowed her eyes, smirking at her. “Be careful what you say, Princess. I think you know I’m dangerous.” In an instant, she darted toward her and behind her, making Saderia spin around in a desperate attempt to protect herself. But all it did was get her confused and dizzy so that Lolista could easily ram into her on the side where her leg still throbbed, to throw her to the ground.

“So, how about the rest of my plan?” Lolista went on, circling Saderia as she struggled to get up. “I came to the school using some forged papers I made to get a chance to be around you and observe you so that I might be able to come up with a plan to get rid of you. Like I said before, I really didn’t have anything specific in mind. I had some ideas, but then I found out you were hanging out with Dashenirus, and that gave me a pretty great plan. I didn’t know if it would work, but you two made it work to perfection.”

Saderia shivered, and looked around wildly for any escape.

“I knew that after a while you would find out who his father was and turn on him,” Lolista went on. “K and M would find out about him, too, and hate him, thinking he was just like Dastarius and trying to kill you. I

didn't even have to do anything there; you destroyed yourself, Princess, with your instant suspicions and your coldness."

"You're one to talk about being cold!" Saderia protested bitterly.

"You're right, so I would know cold when I see it," Lolista replied with a triumphant sneer. "But anyhow, after you found out about his Daddy, I knew it was only a matter of time before 'Dash' would convince you that he was 'good.' I couldn't have that, now, could I? Especially since you and the rest of your goody-goody family would just go along with it and not think twice. 'And they all lived happily ever after!'" Lolista paused to let out a mocking laugh. "I couldn't have that. So, I decided to interfere just a little bit. Copying both of your handwritings was a little difficult, but I managed to make a fake plan in Dash's handwriting to leave for you to find..."

"You made that!" Saderia exclaimed. And not Dash. So he really had been telling the truth the whole time. He'd really just been trying to be her friend. She had felt a warning about that paper...how could she have been so stupid?!

"And I also left a note for Dash in your handwriting. A note that would make him think you hated him because you thought he was 'just like Dastarius.' A note that would make him think that you were plotting against him. And it worked! I really enjoyed watching that little fight between you two; very entertaining."

That was what Dash had meant in their fight! Lolista had set all that up just so they'd turn on each other. "But why...?" she began.

"I'm getting there, Princess. So with you and Dash turned against each other, everyone became aware of that. Because of his father, and because the sweet, innocent Princess thought so, everyone immediately thought Dash was a horrible, evil animal. Including the King and Queen. With that done, I was just going to kill you, and make it look like Dash did it so they'd blame him and not me. Then I'd pick off K and M and the rest of your family—don't you have an aunt and uncle, too?—since they'd be too grief-stricken to really defend themselves." She paused, then smiled an eerie smile. "And now, here you are, being so helpful and stupid by running out into the woods for whatever reason and chasing after me until you were

lost. That gave me an excellent chance to corner and finish you off, so thanks for that. I haven't actually figured out the rest of my plan yet, whether I'm going to blame it on Dash or something else and if I'll be able to somehow take over the throne, but at least I've got the basics. And it all starts with killing you!" With a snarl, Lolista launched herself at Saderia and the two animals went rolling to the ground, locked in a vicious fight.

Saderia was horrified; she couldn't let Dash get blamed for all this! She fought back as fiercely as she could, but Lolista was just too strong. With a flash of fear, Saderia realized that she couldn't possibly get out of this alive, on her own. She would never see her family again, or make up with Dash. "No!" she shouted in sheer panic. "Somebody help!"

In the end, Dash walked out of Dastarius's abandoned house with nothing at all, feeling glad to be away from the place and its horrible memories. Keeping his head down, he let his paws carry him toward his new clearing in the woods. As he walked, his mind whirled with pictures of Saderia and himself playing together, facing whatever they had to together, and he had to fight hard to keep the pain from surfacing. Why was it hitting him now, more than ever?

Because with Saderia he felt safe, accepted, happy...out here in the woods, or by Dastarius's house, he just felt the way he always had: worthless and unwelcome. Again, he wondered if there was any way he could make her understand that he wasn't like Dastarius, that he had helped her and her family... A brief flash of resentment made his paws knead the ground but it didn't last. She didn't owe him anything; he had been glad to help.

Ever since he became friends with her, he had hoped that she would somehow find out about how he'd helped her. Then nothing else would be able to break their friendship. The only reason he hadn't told her was because he had been hiding his past, and had been afraid she wouldn't believe him or would turn on him. Or, at least, she would turn on him sooner.

He kept wishing he could explain to Saderia and her family the truth about himself and his past as he walked. After a while, he looked around to

see if his paws were taking him in the right direction. They weren't, but it was like they knew exactly where they were going, whereas he didn't. Saderia would call it some intuition, but he doubted it; that was her world, not his.

Still, he let himself wander through the woods, not really caring if he took a brief detour. He was just about to turn around and go back to find his clearing when violent snarls, hisses and cries of pain sounded from just in front of him. His amber eyes widened in shock but he immediately raced forward, knowing instantly that someone was in deep trouble. Something told him moments before he burst through a bush into the clearing that he wasn't going to like what he'd find, but despite that warning, he was completely and utterly shocked when he finally found the clearing, where two animals were viciously locked in a battle that could only be a fight to the death. With a gasp of shock and horror, Dash realized that he recognized both of them.

Saderia let out a shriek as Lolista pinned her. She was scratched up and hopeless from the fight, where the lioness had found it entertaining to toy with her. But she seemed to be growing tired of chasing Saderia around the clearing.

"Enough games!" Lolista snarled as she dug her claws into Saderia's throat. Saderia struggled fiercely but she couldn't push her away. It seemed hopeless but suddenly she heard a sharp gasp from somewhere off to the side, and Lolista's claws retracted from her neck.

Struggling to breathe, Saderia turned her head to see where the sound had come from. Lolista had gone curiously still, her ice blue eyes wide with shock. When Saderia saw what had caused her to be so surprised, she gasped, too. Dash was standing a few feet away from them, his mouth open and his amber eyes wide. For a moment, Dash looked like he was about to say something, then didn't, unable to stop staring at the two of them. Finally he managed to choke out, "Mom?"

For a long moment, nobody moved and everything was still and silent. Lolista's mouth opened but no words came out. Saderia's eyes flicked from Lolista to Dash but she could only remain silent. Dash

continued to stare at Lolista, horror and shock clouding his mind as he recognized her from the picture at Dastarius's house. For a moment, he was overwhelmed by the circumstances of seeing her and felt hopeful. But then his gaze flicked to Saderia and his eyes widened as he realized that his mother, Lolista, really was just as bad as Dastarius and she was trying to finish what the dark lion had started. Saderia was in horrible danger.

And just like that, Dash narrowed his eyes as rage flooded through him, blocking out his disappointment, sadness and shock until he was snarling at Lolista. "What are you doing?!" he shouted, his voice higher with shock and pain.

Lolista blinked a few times, as if coming out of a deep sleep, but then she put on a relaxed, knowing smile and her whole body grew less tense. Saderia knew that was a really bad sign. She was up to something.

"Dashenirus, is that you?" Lolista cooed in a sickly sweet voice that Saderia knew was fake. Careful, so as not to draw attention to it, Lolista stepped away from Saderia, although she still held a claw to her throat so she couldn't get away. "I've been looking everywhere, for ten years, for you!" Lolista exclaimed, smiling broadly at Dash.

Dash had begun to walk toward them, slowly, so as not to make Lolista react too quickly, but he stopped at hearing that. Her words sounded so kind; they were the words he had always wanted to hear from his mother if he ever got a chance to meet her. "Y-you have?" he stammered, uncertain.

"Of course!" Lolista practically purred. "Ever since your father threw me out, I've been doing everything I could to find you! It was devastating to lose you!"

Dash's gaze was wary and uncertain as he wondered if it could really be true. He wanted so fiercely to believe her, but he knew deep down that he couldn't trust a word she said. "Why should I believe that?" he growled.

Lolista flinched as if stung and put on a hurt expression. "I'm your mother! I've missed you so much and I've looked everywhere for you! Now we can finally be together, mother and son!" When Dash didn't say anything, Lolista said in a sweet voice, "Why don't you wait for me at your father's old house? I can pick you up there and we can finally be a family."

Saderia was about to scream to Dash that those were all lies, that Lolista was planning on framing him for her death, but Lolista covered her mouth roughly with her paw and sunk her claws in, bringing tears to Saderia's eyes. All she could do was hope desperately that Dash would realize she was lying; he was her only hope.

For Dash, it was like everything else faded into the background until it was just him and his mother, caught up in a great fantasy of what life could be like. Her voice was nice and kind, the way he had wanted to think of it, and she looked sincere...But that only lasted a moment. All he had to do was look at Lolista's cold blue eyes to see that she was lying. His surroundings came back to him, and he was painfully aware that these could be Saderia's last moments if he didn't do something.

"Liar," he growled, feeling strength flow into his limbs as he realized that, once again, he'd been lied to and used. "Why should I believe you when you left, and never gave a thought about me again?" He knew that was true from what he had read only moments ago, and the words were still fresh in his mind. "You're just as bad as my father! All you want to do is hurt me to get what you want! That's not going to happen again, and I'm not letting you hurt Saderia!"

Without another word, he lunged at Lolista, knocking her away from Saderia. Lolista let out a little yelp of surprise as she fell to the ground, but she quickly wriggled away from Dash's grip. She tried to race around him to strike from behind, but Dash was as fast as her. He slashed his claws across her face before Lolista even knew what was happening. Blood dripped from the cut on her forehead and she snarled. But Dash knocked one of her paws out from under her to unbalance her, then pushed her roughly away.

His amber eyes quickly flicked to Saderia, who was struggling to her paws. Her eyes were wide with shock but also gratitude and apologies. When she looked at Dash, she saw in his face that he forgave her completely.

"Go! Run!" Dash shouted. "I'll stay here and keep her away! Go to your family, or go get help! Just get out of here!"

Saderia hesitated for a long moment, unwilling to leave Dash alone to fight Lolista.

Dash couldn't wait for her to make up her mind since Lolista was racing at him. Suddenly she knocked him off his paws and sent him sprawling across the clearing. She jumped onto him, digging her claws into his shoulders to pin him down, but Dash ducked under her paws, confusing her just long enough to claw her belly and shove her away. He rolled away from her just as she regained her balance and came at him again. He dodged to the side and their claws clashed as Lolista swiped at him and Dash protected himself. Lolista immediately ran at him but Dash ducked down and pushed her paws out from under her, rolling onto his back and scoring his claws across her chest, all in one quick movement. As he got up, Lolista stumbled with a hiss of anger and turned to face him.

Saderia realized that Dash was matching Lolista move for move, able to fight her off better than she would have thought. "I'll get help!" she shouted, making up her mind.

"No!" Lolista shouted, but Dash dodged her attacks as he shouted to Saderia, "Go that way!" and pointed in one direction with his tail. "It'll take you back to town!"

Without another word, Saderia darted in that direction, ignoring the throb in her injured leg as she raced through the woods at top speed. The only thing she could think of was making sure she would be able to save Dash in time.

Saderia leaving barely registered in Dash's mind, except for a quick flash of relief, because he had to fight off Lolista and make sure she didn't follow and attack Saderia.

"Get back here!" Lolista snarled, trying to run after Saderia. But Dash was much quicker than her and he blocked her path, slashing his claws at her face to drive her back. He had had plenty of practice with running, which gave him an advantage, for once. Lolista was fast, but he was faster. And he had also had plenty of practice fighting off Dastarius for so long that it was just habit by now. He didn't like fighting, but if he had to, he could do it.

“What are you doing?” Lolista snarled, her kindness and compassionate tone gone with the passing breeze. Her blue eyes narrowed with cold fury. “How could you just let her escape?”

“Because I actually care about Saderia!” Dash snarled at her. “Something you’d never understand!” He dodged a sharp blow from Lolista but she managed to snag a claw in his ear, tearing it as he yanked away from her. He ducked from another blow but then sprinted to block Lolista’s way again when she tried to go after Saderia.

For a moment, he felt horribly guilty that he was fighting his own mother, picking Saderia over his family again. He felt like a traitor, in a way, and almost stopped fighting. But he knew that if he did, Saderia would be hurt and he didn’t want that either. His family never cared about him so why should he feel anything for them? His mother was just trying to manipulate him so that she could kill Saderia. Saderia had actually cared about him, and he cared about her; he had to make sure she was safe.

At the same time, he didn’t know whether Saderia would actually get help for him, or just abandon him here to fight with his mother, maybe even to the death. But he really didn’t care. At least he was helping Saderia again and Saderia would finally realize that that was all he’d ever wanted to do.

“Why do you ‘care’ about her?” Lolista snarled. “She destroyed your family!”

“No, she didn’t!” Dash retorted. “You did! You and Dastarius both destroyed yourselves, not to mention me!”

“I can’t believe you’d pick the Princess who murdered your father and ruined your life by throwing you out in the woods, over your mother!”

“Yeah, well. Get used to it, because I’ve done a lot of things that are slightly unbelievable,” Dash growled, dodging her attack by racing around a tree. She started to run after Saderia but he jumped out and blocked her again.

“She killed your father!” Lolista exclaimed.

“You would have killed her!” Dash retorted, furious. “You’re probably planning on killing me!” He shook his head in disgust. “You and

Dastarius really do make a good pair, you know. You're both power-hungry, you're both unfeeling and evil, and you both hate me and Saderia!"

"You're the one who's just like your father!" Lolista snarled, lunging at him as they both went rolling to the ground.

"If I was, then he wouldn't have hated me so much!" Dash retorted. "That shows how much you know and care about me and my life."

"Stupid manipulative little freak," she hissed as she swiped at him with her claws.

Dash's amber eyes were cold slits as he dodged her claws. "Then apparently I did inherit something from you, Mom."

Lolista was practically steaming with fury. "You are just like your father; that's from his side."

"Well, then I guess Dad finally came in handy," Dash replied, breaking away from her. He raced around her as fast as he could, spinning her around and finally leaping onto her. But Lolista had played that game before, and she caught him, throwing him off as roughly as possible. The fall snapped Dash's neck and he let out a sharp hiss of pain as his paws scrabbled to pick himself up. But Lolista jumped on him in an instant, her claws pushing him down and raking his belly at the same time. Her ice blue eyes were furious and colder than ever as she stared down at him.

"Do I kill you or not?" Lolista hissed furiously. "Well, you are my son, and you might come in handy in my plan, but you're also preventing me from killing Princess."

"Go ahead and kill me. You probably wouldn't give another thought to it and would get a nice, sound sleep at night, wouldn't you?" Dash snarled, struggling against her fiercely.

"I could just knock you out and be on my way," Lolista decided, digging her claws in. But Dash fastened his teeth in her leg, wanting to give Saderia as much of a head start as possible. Lolista let out a cry and yanked her paw away from him, giving him the chance to rake his claws across her chest and send her flying away. But his strength was depleting and he was bleeding from several wounds. He probably wouldn't be able to keep this

up for long, but he really hoped that Saderia would be able to get as far away as she could.

Saderia raced down the dirt path as fast as she could, not caring that she was leaving a bloody trail behind her. She was concerned only with getting help for Dash. What if she was too late? Would Lolista kill her own son? Thinking of the crazed, cold look in her eyes, Saderia realized that she just might, in order to get to her. Running even faster, she shouted, “Mom! Dad!”

Almost immediately, Karenisha and Makero rushed toward her, their faces pale with worry. When they saw her, horror and fear flickered across their faces and she realized she must look horrible from the fight.

“What happened to you?” Makero demanded.

“When you didn’t come home, we looked everywhere, and Ms. Spot told us how you’d run out of the school,” Karenisha went on. “Why didn’t you come home? And what happened to you?” Her voice rose several octaves as she spoke.

Saderia was exhausted from the fight and the race to her home and she was panting. “Dash...” she began between pants.

“He did this to you?” Karenisha exclaimed. “I thought he was gone!”

“No!” Saderia shouted. “Dash didn’t do this to me! He’s in big trouble and she might kill him if we don’t get over there right now! We have to help him! Please, you have to come with me!”

By now, Cia and Uncle Jash had appeared in front of her, too.

“What happened to her?” Cia asked in alarm.

“What’s going on?” Uncle Jash demanded.

Karenisha obviously wanted to ask lots of questions, but, seeing the terrified, urgent look in her daughter’s eyes, she just said, “We’ll help. Where do we go?”

“Follow me!” Saderia exclaimed, racing back in the direction she had come, although her legs were screaming in protest. As her mother and father and aunt and uncle fell into step beside her, all five of them racing

down the path toward that horrible clearing, Saderia quickly explained, “Dash never wanted to hurt me! He’s really a great animal and he’s the one that saved me back in the dungeon and helped me free you! His father doesn’t matter anymore!” Karenisha and Makero looked shocked but Saderia went on between pants, “But his mother, Lolista, wants revenge against me. She was planning on framing him for killing me! She’s the one who did this to me and she’s going to kill Dash if we don’t get there quickly!”

“Lolista!” Karenisha gasped. “Dastarius’s wife!”

“She did this to you?” Makero exclaimed.

“Yes, and we can’t be too late! We have to help Dash! Hurry!”

Karenisha and Makero exchanged a glance; they clearly didn’t know what exactly was going on, but they had to just go with it and trust the brief information Saderia had given them.

Saderia led them along the dirt path, into town, and then through the woods. For a moment, she was terrified she wouldn’t be able to find her way back to the clearing, but her paws carried her expertly through the woods until she and her family broke through the trees into a now bloody clearing where they found Dash and Lolista.

Saderia let out a cry of horror when she saw Lolista pinning Dash to the ground. Dash was panting, his breathing painful-sounding and uneven. His fur was sticky with his own blood and cuts ran across his face and sides.

All it had taken for Lolista to get the upper hand was for Dash to have made one bad move. Then he had been slowed down by pain and exhaustion and Lolista had been able to pin him to the ground and render him helpless.

When he heard a cry from one side of the clearing, he lifted his head and saw Saderia standing a few feet away with her family behind her. When she looked at him, he gave her a smile that seemed sad and painful, but he was relieved that she had returned, and happy that she had come through for him. She really did care about him, after all.

Saderia couldn't stop staring at her poor friend, pinned under Lolista's claws. She had to do something. Lolista's head had snapped up and she was staring in horror at her and her family, but that wasn't enough to stop her. Without thinking, Saderia lunged at Lolista, ignoring shouts from her family, and knocked the bright lioness off of Dash. Lolista threw her to the side easily, and went after her, but before she could reach her, Dash was up and standing in front of Saderia, blocking her way.

"This fight is over," he snarled at his mother. "Leave her alone."

For a moment, Lolista looked about to attack but then Karenisha and Makero rushed to Dash's side, both furious and prepared to fight, while Cia and Uncle Jash came up behind them. Saderia watched Lolista closely, and saw alarm and fear flit across her face; she knew she couldn't fight all of them and expect to win. But then Lolista's gaze became furious and she snarled at Saderia and Dash. "I will have my revenge! I'll be back!"

Karenisha and Makero growled but before they could attack, Lolista turned around and fled through the trees as fast as she could go. The bushes rustled around her but then fell still. The clearing was completely silent except for Saderia and Dash's labored breathing.

After a long moment, Karenisha turned to Dash with a wary and confused but grateful expression. "Saderia tells us that...we shouldn't have judged you so quickly before. That...that was really your mother?"

Dash didn't look at her; instead he stared at the place where Lolista had departed. Slowly, he just nodded.

"And you fought her just to protect my daughter?" she asked quietly.

Again, he just nodded, not really thinking about it as he stared after his mother.

Karenisha looked about to say something else but then closed her mouth, admiration and gratitude lighting up her amber eyes. Makero looked the same way and he and Karenisha exchanged a quick glance. Karenisha took charge. "We have to get Saderia and Dash home so that they can recover," she announced.

Saderia gave her a grateful smile, while Dash blinked and finally turned around to look at them. “Me?” he asked. “You want me to come, too?”

“Of course,” Karenisha said, her voice suddenly sad and apologetic. “There’s obviously more to this than we realized, and we’d like to hear your side of the story once you’ve recovered from this. Of course, we’ll help you care for your wounds, too.”

Dash blinked, and Saderia hastily stepped up to him, her amber eyes serious and pleading for forgiveness. “I’m so sorry, Dash,” she said quietly. “I shouldn’t have turned on you like that. I was wrong. There’s a lot to explain but we should go to my house so we can get these cuts treated. Mom and Dad will help you; they know what a great animal you are now. Once we’re better, we’ll all listen if you want to explain. I’m really sorry, Dash. Will you give me another chance?”

Again, Dash blinked in surprise, but then hope blocked out everything else, even the stinging, throbbing pain from his fight with Lolista. “Of course,” he said. “You’ll really listen now?”

“Yes,” Saderia told him. “And I have to tell you and Mom and Dad a few things, too. I promise we’ll listen. Right, guys?” She turned to her parents with a hopeful expression.

“Of course,” Karenisha agreed. “Now let’s go home. We’ll all get to hear both sides of the story.”

“They’ll be time to talk after you two are cared for,” Makero added, with a worried expression to match Karenisha’s. “We won’t hurt you, Dash, and we will listen. We should go now.”

“Okay...” Dash murmured, dazed by how fast things had happened. He began to follow them as they led him and Saderia carefully away from the clearing and toward Saderia’s house. He felt hopeful, but when he reached the edge of the clearing, the hope wasn’t enough to block out the sorrow he felt as he looked back, one last time, at the place where his mother had disappeared.

Then he felt a gentle touch on his shoulder and looked to see Saderia beside him. Instantly afraid that he might have ruined his one chance to explain things to them by missing his mother, he began, “I...!”

“It’s all right,” Saderia murmured softly. “I understand.”
And he knew she did.

Chapter Sixteen

The Real Story

After Saderia and Dash had had their wounds taken care of and were allowed to rest for a while, they were ready to tell their sides of the story.

“I was going to listen to you, at first,” Saderia told Dash when they all sat on the living room floor to talk. “Although, I might not have believed you after I had just heard about your father. But then I found this paper. It looked like it was written in your handwriting and it was about this plan that I thought you had against me. I found out later that Lolista had just put it there to fool me and turn me against you. She was planning on blaming you for my death, you know.”

Dash closed his eyes for a minute. “I know.” He looked at Saderia. “I found a note on Wednesday, too, in your handwriting. It made me think you hated me and you were plotting against me. That was why I fought with you that day and then ran away. But that was Lolista, too, right?”

“Right, Lolista told me that. Mom, she also told me that she had something against you,” Saderia added curiously.

Karenisha hissed softly to herself. “She was always jealous of my power and she’s hated the royal family forever. One time, when there was a brief depression, she and her family blamed us for what happened to them, even though there wasn’t much we could do, at the time. I wanted to help her, but I couldn’t and she probably blames me for that. And some rumor did start about her since something bad happened to her, but I certainly didn’t start it.”

“I didn’t think so,” Saderia told her. “I was just curious.” Going on, she said, “Anyway, I’ve been having Dreams that gave me hints and warned me against Lolista.” She had figured out that Lolista was the cold blue eyes in the dungeon when Dash had been hurt in her Dream and that the false notes she had left for them were the pieces of paper with blood on them from the Dream with the grass. She had also realized that her last Dream

had been telling her of how Dash would stand up to Lolista for her. And when he was bleeding, she had feared he was dying, but the Dream was just using symbolism again. The blood in her Dream was Dash's bloodline of Dastarius and Lolista, and it was pouring out of him because he was finally getting past it.

"And I saw Dash at school even though I said I hadn't. But I didn't want to tell you because you might hurt him," Saderia told her parents. "I guess it was an instinctual thing." She turned to Dash. "I was wrong not to listen to you and to be so suspicious and I'm sorry. I'll listen to you now."

"Thanks," Dash said, feeling immense relief. "And I don't hate you for judging me so quickly. I understand why you did."

Saderia felt just as relieved. "You helped me back in the dungeon, too. I found your note. Can you tell me what did happen in the past?"

Karenisha and Makero looked at him with curious but kind expressions and Dash was silent for a long moment. Finally, he took a deep breath and began, "Dastarius hated me from the moment I was born, I think. He hated me because I wasn't like him and because I thought what he was doing was horrible and wrong. He always fought with me, and called me worthless and everything else. I always felt guilty, too, because I had no way of helping you when you were down in the dungeon," he said to Karenisha and Makero. "But Dastarius would kill me in a heartbeat if I tried anything and I didn't know where the keys were. Not that I didn't look, but it was only when I was sure Dastarius wouldn't find out."

He took a deep breath and went on, "I ran away a few days before Saderia was captured. For a while, I stayed away, not wanting anything to do with that place again. But then I came back to spy through the trees. That was when I saw that Dastarius had captured Saderia and the rest of her family. After that, I knew I had to do something, and I knew enough about the dungeon to know that I might be able to help at least one of you. I already knew that Karenisha and Makero were in the wrong cell, but Saderia or one of her family members might be in the cell with the vent. So, one night, I was finally able to get up enough courage to sneak into the house. I unscrewed the vent in the kitchen and then went down to the

dungeon and told Saderia how to get free, and gave her a screwdriver to open the vent.”

Saderia remembered all that was said between them back in the dungeon and felt a brief shock that she was actually getting to know the one who had helped her. Then she remembered how he had lingered on the first syllable of Dastarius’s name, which had made her suspicious. With a flash of understanding, she realized that he had almost said Dad.

“After that, I had to get out of there, because if Dastarius caught me and found out what I’d done, he’d kill me and not give it another thought.” Dash’s voice was sad as he said it and Saderia rested her tail gently on his shoulders, giving him a sympathetic look. “I went back to the woods and watched after that,” Dash went on. “When Dastarius found out that Saderia had escaped, he was mad, as you can guess. He was ranting to himself, as usual, about how it happened and how to fix it. I listened to him from right outside and heard him, which is how I figured out how to help Saderia.

“Dastarius figured out that Saderia had stolen the keys from his closet, which I didn’t know about before. But by listening to him, I found out that those keys led to a cabin just a little away from ou—his house,” he quickly corrected himself.

Saderia gave him an understanding look. “It’s okay,” she told him quietly.

“Saderia’s right,” Karenisha agreed. “Go on with your story. Don’t worry.”

Sighing in relief, Dash continued, “I had been to the cabin once before, but that was years ago, before Dastarius turned it into another dungeon and locked it, so I couldn’t get in. That’s how I knew the way to it.

“I heard Dastarius say that the keys Saderia took would open the dungeon in there, where he kept those kidnapped kids and the actual keys for the dungeon’s cells. He finally calmed down, guessing that Saderia would come back eventually, thinking she had the right keys to free her family. I thought he was probably right, so I ran after Saderia. Eventually I found her, and I followed her, staying a few feet behind her. When she fell asleep out in the woods, she had this diary with her and the keys. I didn’t want to wake her up because I didn’t want her to see me, so I just wrote her

that note, hoping she'd take the advice. Then I ran back to Dad—Dastarius's house, to watch him and make sure he wasn't going to go after Saderia and to make sure Saderia didn't come back after all.

“I saw him run out of the house a while later, excited about something...”

“He had learned the way into the tomb,” Karenisha explained. “I told him, because I thought he had Saderia.”

Dash nodded in understanding. “So the door was left open. I was planning on opening the doors at the end of the hall that led to the room with the dungeon. I had the keys because my room was also on that hall. But Dastarius left that door open, so I didn't need to unlock it.

“Later Saderia came along and then she and her family ran out of the house. I was glad that I could finally help but...” His amber eyes clouded. “Then, a lot later, I heard Karenisha and Makero tell the whole story to the forest, and that Dastarius was dead...” He blinked rapidly. “I felt relieved at first, then guilty about it. And I did kind of miss him, since he was my father... But he did deserve it, I know.” He looked down.

“I'm sorry,” Karenisha said gently, much to his surprise. “I wasn't aware how hurt you were. None of us were.” Seeing Dash's stunned expression, she told him, “We might have hated Dastarius, but he was still your father, and we can accept that.”

“You don't have to stop caring about him,” Makero told him. “We can understand that, and you don't have to hide it or be ashamed. We understand now, and we're glad we finally do. We know that you're really a great animal, and we apologize for judging you so quickly and unfairly.”

Karenisha, Cia and Uncle Jash all voiced their apologies, as well, and Saderia gave him a sympathetic look. He returned it with a slight, reassuring smile that cheered her up a little.

“When I ran out of the school,” Saderia picked up the story for her parents, “it was because I had found Dash's note. That note finally made me realize he was the one who helped me. After I found it, I ran into the woods because I had to apologize and make it right. But Lolista led me in circles so that I would get lost and be a more vulnerable target.”

“I was at Dastarius’s house at the time,” Dash admitted. “I was looking for something that would tell me about my mother, since I never knew her. I saw a picture of her, and found some things she had written... none of them were good. She didn’t care about me at all.”

“I’m sorry,” Saderia whispered gently.

Dash shrugged. “It’s fine. But then I heard you and Mom...well, Lolista, fighting, and I ran over. Lolista just wanted to use me, I know, so I attacked her to protect Saderia,” he told Karenisha and Makero.

“You fought really well,” Saderia told him. “I know how hard it must have been to do that. Thank you.”

“I just wanted to help you. As for fighting...well, I guess I got that from Dad. He sure gave me a lot of chances to practice, at least.” He waited for them to say something, but the only emotion on their faces was compassion, understanding, and gratitude. He let himself hope. “So, I’m forgiven then?” he asked tentatively.

To his surprise, Saderia pressed up against him, smiling fondly. Karenisha and Makero came over, as well, to brush their tails caringly across his scratched back, each of them giving him kind smiles. Karenisha leaned close to him, her face and voice gentle as she said, “There’s nothing to forgive.”

“If anything, we should thank you for all you’ve done to help us,” Makero agreed.

“You must have gone through a lot just to help us out,” Cia spoke up.

“Very brave of you,” Uncle Jash chimed in.

Suddenly Karenisha’s face grew serious. “Dash, you said you ran away, and now your father is gone...where do you live?”

“The woods,” he replied, realizing somberly that this moment would soon be over and he’d have to go back to living there again. But what Karenisha said next made his eyes widen in shock.

Karenisha and Makero had a brief conference with Cia and Jash, and then went over to him again. “If you’d like,” Karenisha began, “you can live with us.”

“We’d be happy to take you in after all you’ve done,” Makero agreed.

Dash’s mouth dropped open in shock, and for a moment it was like the world stopped; he couldn’t believe what he’d heard.

“You wouldn’t have to forget about your real family,” Karenisha went on. “But we’d love to have you live with us, and I’m sure Saderia would, too. We can assure you that you’d be welcome. We already care about you, especially after all that you’ve done to help us. If you don’t mind, you could be a part of our family.”

Dash blinked several times. “Wh-what did you say?”

“Like part of our family,” Saderia agreed, her smile lighting up her face. “I think it’s a great idea! It’d be great to have you live here, Dash, you’re my best friend! We could build you a cool new room, and you would be just like family.”

“She’s right,” Makero put in. “We’d make sure you felt welcome. You could talk to us about anything.”

For a moment, Dash was speechless. Frozen with shock but also a growing hope and happiness, he whispered, “Really? You’d really let me live here? I’d really be part of your family?”

“Of course,” Karenisha and Saderia said at the same time.

Looking at Karenisha, he stammered, “So I’d be like...like you’re son?”

“Adopted, of course. You don’t have to forget your real family. We understand.”

“It’d be wonderful, Dash,” Saderia told him, beaming. “We’d be like brother and sister. We could do everything together! We’d be family!”

Time seemed to have frozen, but, unlike when he’d faced Lolista, this time it was in a good way. The possibilities swirled around in Dash’s mind. He knew what great animals Karenisha and Makero were, how fair and kind-hearted they had always been. They actually seemed sincere about caring about him, unlike Lolista; he saw nothing but kindness in their eyes. Maybe he could have a real home, with a real family, something he had always wished for...Briefly, he realized that if he accepted this offer he

would be the King and Queen's adopted son, but that didn't really mean anything to him. He didn't think of them as royalty; he thought of them as great friends.

And if he did join their family, he would be with Saderia every day and they would be like brother and sister! They really could do everything together and stick up for one another. They'd be closer than he could have ever imagined, and nothing would be able to break them apart.

"Would you like to become part of our family?" Karenisha prompted gently.

Dash blinked and looked around at them: Saderia, Karenisha, Makero, Cia, Jash... his new family! "Of course I would," he murmured in a stunned, but happy voice. The minute he said it and he realized that he finally had a kind, accepting family, he broke out in a smile. Saderia beamed, too, excitement and happiness flowing through her as she turned to grin at her new brother.

Construction on Dash's new room began immediately; Karenisha, Makero, Cia, Uncle Jash and Saderia all pitched in to help. Then the very next day, Karenisha and Makero called a meeting of the forest to announce what had happened, leaping to the top of a tree to call the meeting.

They explained how they had adopted Dash, but some of them knew his secret and were confused, making the King and Queen have to briefly explain everything that had happened, with Saderia's help. Finally, the forest seemed to understand and they accepted Dash since he had the King and Queen's approval, and since he was now part of the royal family. At the end of the meeting, Makero announced, "We now have two children, Saderia and Dash, the Princess and Prince."

Dash fully realized then that he was actually part of the royal family, and suddenly he was shocked. He was actually a part of the most powerful family, a family that controlled the whole forest. Makero had actually called him the Prince, while Saderia was the Princess. Obviously, Saderia would be the one to inherit the throne when they grew up, but it was still amazing.

However, he really didn't care about being 'royal,' or having power. All he cared about was that he was finally accepted in a real family.

After they went home from the meeting, they began to work on Dash's room again, which would be across from Saderia's room. They took breaks to talk and play together.

Throughout the days, Dash slowly started to get the hang of living with them and knew that he would stay there forever. Saderia showed him around the house and the woods surrounding it until he was familiar with all of it. She even showed him the trap door leading to the secret room in the living room, told him about the secret compartment in Cia and Uncle Jash's closet, and, with her mother's permission, showed him Karenisha's store room, hidden behind her closet.

As Dash was looking around the store room, Saderia suddenly got a great idea and knew in her heart that it was a good thing to do. She knew Dash felt a little weird adjusting to life with her family. He seemed to feel like he didn't belong, and she wanted to do everything she could to make sure he knew he did belong.

"Come on," she said to Dash, starting toward a door in the store room.

"Where's that go?" he asked.

"To the dungeon," Saderia told him gently.

Dash blinked and tensed. "The dungeon?" Saderia and her family had a dungeon?

"It hasn't been used for thousands of years," Saderia assured him. "But there's something down there I want to show you."

Still confused but a little more assured, Dash just shrugged.
"Okay...Like what?"

"You'll see. Come on." Using the keys to unlock the big, hefty door, she threw it open and the two of them started down the spiral staircase into the dungeon. It was dark inside, as always, but their amber eyes easily adjusted to the blackness and they looked around.

It was creepy in the dungeon, and Dash wondered why they were down there, other than to show him around. He could make out the old, rusted bars of the individual cells, and the rough stone walls of the dungeon,

but when he squinted he could make out a door at the very end of the dungeon. "Where does that go?" he asked curiously.

“You’ll find out. That’s where we’re going. Come on, it’s okay.” Saderia stepped forward and padded down the line of cells confidently, while Dash followed behind her, trusting her completely.

Saderia shoved on the old door at the end of the hall to force it open. The two of them stepped into the little room. It contained only a tiny podium, a long scroll, a feather pen, and an unlit candle. "Take a look at this scroll," she told him, opening it and holding it out for him.

Dash had to look closely to make out the black lines on the scroll in the dim light, but eventually he was able to see that they were names, with lines connecting them. He blinked questioningly at Saderia, and she explained, “It’s the royal family tree. I found it a while ago. My name’s at the bottom. One horizontal line means they’re siblings. Two horizontal lines between two names means the animals were married. And the vertical lines show the children of two animals.”

Dash looked back at the royal family tree with new understanding, then turned his gaze to the bottom of the scroll when Saderia told him to. At the bottom there were several names: Karenisha, Makero, Cia, Jash, and Saderia.

“Let me see that,” Saderia said, taking the scroll from him to hold it and the feather pen gently. Curious, Dash watched her write something elegantly at the bottom of the scroll, putting the pen back on the podium when she was done. “Here,” she said, handing it back to him. Now when he glanced at the bottom it looked like this:

Jash--Cia-Queen Karenisha--King Makero

Dashenirus-Saderia

Dash stared at his rapidly drying name, elegantly written with a mark to show he was Saderia's brother, as if he was actually a part of the royal family. "Are you sure you should do that?" he asked her cautiously.

“Of course,” she replied, smiling. “You’re part of the royal family now. You deserve to be on the family tree, too.”

A warm sense of belonging made Dash smile. “Thanks. I’m glad I’m part of your family.”

Saderia flicked him gently with her tail, her amber eyes shining. “Me too.”

As the weeks passed by, Dash grew more accustomed to waking up in his new room, whereas before he had started the day a little disoriented. He got used to greeting Saderia happily in the morning, knowing that he would see her every morning for the rest of his life. For the first time in a long time, he felt truly happy as he continued the custom of going out to the dining room, sitting at a solid gold table and talking enthusiastically with Karenisha, Makero, Cia and Jash, as if they really were his family. Dash fit in easily with the family when he finally got used to it, realizing with a jolt of happiness that this was his life and there would be no going back to the woods or Dastarius’s house or the other horrible places he had been. He was with his family now, and it would stay that way forever.

Later, he and Saderia showed up at school together on the weekdays, and were eagerly greeted by Loki. The cheetah was happy to see that they were both okay, and glad that Dash had found a great new home. She wasn’t jealous that he had ended up in the royal family, unlike others. Some, like Grath, were envious but Dash just ignored them. Some treated him like royalty but others just greeted him like they would anyone, the same way they greeted Saderia, the way they liked it. Saderia helped him with school, and so did Karenisha and Makero, as if they were his real parents.

Then, in the afternoons and on weekends, he and Saderia went out to play in the woods, going on pretend adventures, treks through the woods and to meadows, even Karenisha’s Meadow. He also agreed to help her interpret any Dreams she might have in the future, now that he knew about it from Karenisha and Saderia’s explanations.

Saderia was sure her life was on top. Her best friend was now her brother and she got to greet him every day and go on adventures. She

finally had someone to confide everything to and to play around with, someone who knew her better than anybody. Dash was like her in a way, although a bit more timid, but she liked it that way. She stayed friends with Loki at school and earned Ms. Spot's respect, along with the other teachers. It still bothered her when she thought about Lolista, out there somewhere, scheming against her, but she knew that she could overcome anything with her best friend beside her.

However, her confidence was almost shaken by a dream she had later. In the dream, there were no distinct images, just slight flashes of scenes that sent shivers down her spine. First, she saw amber eyes, narrowed and flashing with fury and knew they belonged to Dastarius—she could tell the difference between him and Dash now, because Dash would never glare at her like that. She saw a swirling blend of sounds and colors, of Dastarius's growl and her own sharp hiss. Glowing words flashed in front of her over and over again and in the background she heard a soft voice whispering, "The daughter of the fiftieth generation...the Power of Dreams stronger than any member of the royal family before her...Heart, Crown, Scepter, Eye..." More flashes of Dastarius, of the tomb, the dungeon, a voice whispering, "The prophecy!" And then everything was black except for a tiny, almost inaudible voice whispering, "The past will never be forgotten."

She had awoken in a sweat and immediately expected it to be a Dream, but then wondered if it wasn't just an ordinary nightmare. It could be, after all she had been through, and it hadn't really predicted anything in the future. She had relaxed, and her confidence returned; she really believed she and Dash could face anything together, even if this was a Dream. But it was probably just a normal nightmare. By the end of that day, she had completely forgotten about it, too caught up with enjoying the company of her best friend.

One day, after playing around with Karenisha, Makero, Cia and Uncle Jash, Saderia and Dash had walked through the woods outside of her house, then climbed to the top of the tallest tree they could find. They sat up on the branch, looking down on the forest, their forest. Saderia felt warm and she was sure she was glowing again, just not so literally this time. Dash

felt the same way, like his life was finally getting better, and when he turned to smile at Saderia, she was smiling back.

“I wonder what else is out there,” Saderia wondered out loud. “I wonder what other adventures we’ll have to face.”

Dash stared out at the forest once more and felt a warm rush of confidence. “I don’t know, but I’d sure like to find out.”

Saderia grinned. “Me too.” Her amber eyes sparkled. “The prophecy won’t be so bad if you’re helping. It’s always exciting to think about the adventures we might have.”

Dash felt himself smile with real happiness. “You’re right.”

Saderia turned to him with shining eyes. “And we’ll be able to face anything, as long as we’re together.”

Dash turned to smile at her, his amber eyes shimmering, and they turned back to look out at the forest. Their tails twined together once more as they thought of the great possibilities and amazing adventures that were waiting for them. As long as they were together.



Sarah Renée has loved writing from an early age. She has been writing short stories since the age of four and at the age of ten, she came up with the idea for The Tiger Princess, writing the novel when she was twelve. She is fascinated with wild animals and the wild world outside her home, and has an obvious great love of tigers. She enjoys spending time with her cats, reading, drawing and playing her violin when she is not writing. In her free time, she is constantly daydreaming about her many characters, creating new ones, and coming up with interesting adventure story ideas. She is thirteen years old.

Visit www.thetigerprincess.com to learn more about Sarah Renée, her books, and more!

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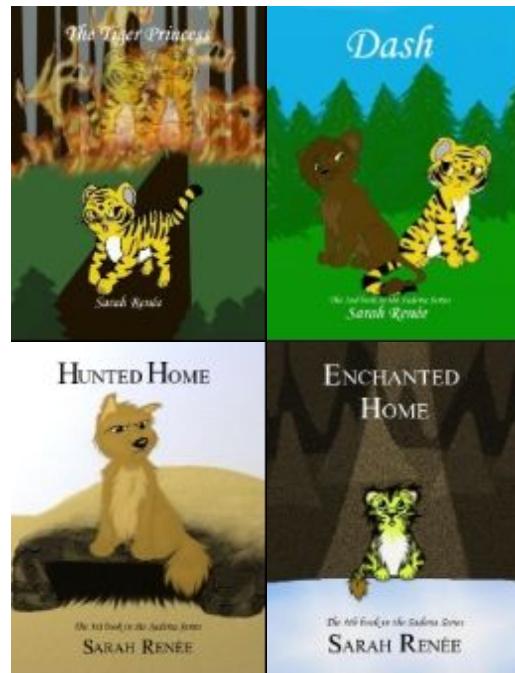
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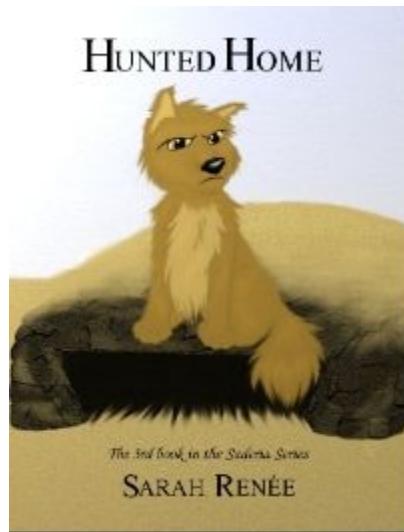
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Saderia Series Book 3:

Hunted Home



*One year ago, a young dingo was murdered for her beliefs.
The murderer was never punished.
One year later, the killer seeks a new target...*

Dingo is a kind-hearted canine living in a brutal desert. Hated by his brother and the cruel dingoes in his pack, Dingo's only thought is of survival. Yet memories of his slain sister plague him.

Meanwhile, a new foe begins terrorizing the forest, and Saderia must face the fact that their only hope for survival may mean leaving the forest. Forever.

Check out [Hunted Home](#) on Amazon, or read an excerpt on the next page!

Hunted Home

Chapter One

Hated

Blood dripped out of Dingo's side, staining his brown fur crimson as it spilled onto the sand beneath him. Lying on the ground panting, he tried not to look up to see his attackers, knowing the anguish it would bring, but he couldn't block out their cruel jeers: two low growls and one hyena-like laugh.

"What's the matter, Dingo? Too scared to fight back?" a low, gruff voice taunted. Dingo knew that voice well; it belonged to Bone. "That's right—whimper on the ground, freak."

He winced and gritted his teeth to stop from howling in pain when something stung the numerous wounds on his side. He knew one of the dingoes must have kicked sand into his wounds. A moment later, the voice of Rock revealed it was he who had done it. "Does it hurt, Dingo? You deserve that and worse."

"Pathetic," Bone growled. This time Dingo did let out a loud howl as strong fangs tore into his shoulder. He shuddered in disgust when he felt the sticky blood flow down his leg and seep into his fur.

"You're such a loser, Dingo!" another voice chortled, forcing Dingo to squeeze his eyes shut tighter against the rush of pain. The voice belonged to Rip, but hard as he tried, Dingo could never hate him the way he hated Bone and Rock.

"Open your eyes." Bone's dangerous growl sent shivers down his spine as he turned away from him, still with his eyes shut. He felt as if he was on fire from the burning anguish coursing through him after what Bone, Rock, and Rip had done to him.

Gasping, he finally dared to open his eyes, their light brown depths darkened with sadness. His breath caught in horror at the sight of Bone's sadistic, sneering face staring down at him. The piercing desert sunlight made Bone's amber eyes glint with bloodlust and his dark brown, almost

black fur stood out against the endless yellow brown sand all around them. The muscles in his shoulders made him look like a lethal weapon as his tail flicked joyfully back and forth. Bone loved Dingo's pain.

"Had enough, Dingo?" he snarled quietly.

Dingo turned his light brown eyes to him with a pleading expression. "Bone, enough. Just stop this!"

But a second later, he let out a howl of pain when Bone clawed him across his face. His dark, quiet laughter floated over to Dingo's bloody ears as Dingo fought to stop tears from pricking his eyes. Dingoes weren't supposed to cry.

"Leave me alone," he growled through gritted teeth.

Bone just laughed as another dingo stepped forward to stand beside him. The other dingo, Rock, with his long, dusty brown fur and dark brown eyes, smirked down at him like Bone. Dingo felt his body tense with anger and sadness; it was one thing for Bone, his own brother, to torture him, but did he have to get his friend in on it, too? He looked up at his brother, but Bone's eyes glinted dangerously, as if to warn him against protesting. And of course he didn't even as a third dingo named Rip crept forward to stand on Bone's left.

Dingo turned to look at his other brother, Rip, with sad eyes. Rip carefully avoided his gaze. He was grinning like the other two, but his yellow eyes looked very uneasy. Rip wasn't evil; he just followed Bone's evil crowd. Dingo could never hate him for that, considering Bone sometimes treated his followers just as bad as his enemies. Rip's unkempt, reddish fur was standing a bit on end, an obvious sign of his unease.

"Rip," Dingo sighed, "why are you doing this?"

His brother's yellow eyes were suddenly flaming. "Shut up! You deserve it."

"Well said, Rip," Bone chuckled. "You and Rock can go back to camp now, though. I'll finish up here."

Dingo felt the urge to beg them not to leave him alone with Bone, especially Rip, but he didn't dare. Rip was rather quick to leave while Rock just shrugged and turned around to lumber apathetically back to camp. Dingo cast a glance back at his lacerated body and could barely make out the shaggy, brown fur beneath the blood. His scruffy tail flicked back and

forth in distress as he looked back up at Bone, who was sneering at him with an evil glint in his eyes.

“Bone,” he said hoarsely, “you’ve already done enough. Let’s just go back to camp.”

He laughed. “No, I don’t think so.”

Dingo sighed, wanting to bury his face in the sand. “Why do you do this to me?”

That was probably a dumb question; Bone did it because he hated Dingo and because he could get away with it. Dingo was hated by the other evil dingoes in his pack, after all, so they wouldn’t punish Bone if he attacked him.

“Why do you and the others hate me so much?” Dingo asked another pointless question, not really expecting an answer.

Bone just shook his head and as Dingo had anticipated offered no real response. “We hate you because you’re weak, because you don’t fight,” he growled. He chuckled darkly. “You are so pathetic, Dingo. You wouldn’t even defend yourself.”

“What exactly was I supposed to do? There were three of you!” Dingo shouted, his temper rising as it always did when he was alone with his oldest brother.

“Fight back,” Bone replied.

“Oh, and then what? You’d just use that as an excuse to kill me?”

“That’s the plan.” When Dingo growled furiously, Bone just laughed. “You know I’m out to get you, Dingo, and that’s ruining your life.”

Dingo looked away.

“Well?” Bone prompted. “Isn’t it?”

“My life’s already been ruined, Bone,” Dingo muttered, his gaze automatically turning to the stars twinkling above them in the night sky. As his thoughts turned again to his sister an anguish far stronger than that he would ever feel from anything Bone and his minions did to him burned through his body. He nearly let out a howl and just barely managed to hold it in as fierce grief, sorrow, and guilt clouded his mind.

He suddenly noticed the satisfied look on Bone’s face as his brother realized what he must be thinking about; Bone knew that his sister’s fate had hurt him most of all.

Dingo felt sick. "You don't even care about what happened to Claw."

Bone shrugged. "I never have. I got over her death like everyone else, when you should have."

"She was all I had."

Bone's eyes gleamed. "I know." He glanced behind him. "I'm going back to camp now and you can crawl back, too, or just lay out here and die; I don't really care which. If you do come back, try to wash the blood off of you first so the rest of us back at camp don't have to look at it."

As Bone turned to walk away, Dingo gritted his teeth. "'Wash the blood off...'" He growled furiously to himself and dug his claws into the sand, trying to ease his fury. Struggling to his paws, he looked out at the desert around him that was his home, his ears drooping with misery. He didn't want to go back to the dingo camp, but that would just mean Bone had won. Sighing, he started forward with his head down and his tail dragging, trying to ignore the pain shooting up his legs and down his spine every time he put a paw down.

It hurt, but Dingo was used to Bone's torture by that point in his life; his older brother had hated him since they were pups. He wasn't the only one either. Dingo had tried not to let it get to him and had even tried to get along with Bone at first, but he had found out long ago that that was an impossibility.

He looked ahead and unconsciously slowed down when he saw the dingo camp, his eyes narrowing with defeat. He really didn't want to go in there and put up with the other dingoes' taunting, but he had no choice.

The entrance to the dingoes' camp was marked by two piles of bones left over from the prey they hunted. The sandy ground dipped down into a sort of valley surrounded by sandy hills. On the side of each hill was a dark, rocky den partially hidden from view by the sand covering it. All the dens were formed within the larger surrounding sand dunes, but the two largest dens sat at the back of the valley. There was a large water trough made of rock in the center of the camp, but otherwise the place was very bare like the desert itself. Around the camp, all of the dingoes were going about their normal activities and Dingo dared to hope that they wouldn't bother him much.

As he stepped into his camp, Dingo was sure he must look pretty bad. To confirm his thoughts, Tear, his other brother, crawled out of the den, looked at him, and raised his eyebrows. His yellow eyes were filled with a mixture of surprise and perhaps amusement.

“What happened to you?” he asked, proving it to be mostly amusement.

Dingo flattened his ears. “Thanks for the concern, Tear.”

Tear just shrugged with a stupid grin. “Did you get attacked again?”

Dingo sighed and stepped into camp, heading for the den that he shared with two of his three brothers. “Yes, Tear, I got attacked *again*.”

“By Bone?”

“Of course.”

Tear just chuckled to which Dingo shot him an annoyed glance. “You know, this might be funny to you, but you’re not the one bleeding and suffering. You’re not the one everybody hates.”

“Oh, lighten up,” Tear said. “So everybody hates you. So what? I would have thought you’d be used to it by now.”

Dingo gave him a dry look. “Yes, Tear, I’ve certainly come to *love* their hatred. It’s simply heartwarming.”

“Well, you know, if you just changed, you wouldn’t be hated.”

“Change into what? A battle-hungry, murderous hound? Thanks, but no thanks.”

Tear just rolled his eyes. “Whatever, Dingo. I really don’t know why you haven’t been exiled yet, but if you don’t change, it’ll happen.”

Dingo sighed; everybody was always telling him he’d be exiled, sent away to live on his own far away from the pack. It really didn’t seem so bad unless he counted the fact that most outcasts starved to death and the fact that the pack hunted them down like prey. If he could ignore those little details, it would seem like a vacation. “At this point, Tear, I really wouldn’t mind being an outcast,” Dingo muttered.

Tear looked at him like he was insane. “If you like dying then go ahead.” He paused and seemed to think for a moment. “Wait, I think I know why you haven’t been exiled yet. You *are* the son of the Leader of the pack, so it would probably make him look bad if his own son was an outcast. That is, it would make him look even *worse* since you’ve already embarrassed him by being so weak.”

“Wow, I feel so ashamed,” Dingo muttered sarcastically. He rolled his eyes. “Listen, Tear, it’s been fun discussing how much I’m hated around here, but I just got mauled by our brothers and I’m not in a great mood for talking.”

Tear shrugged. “Fine. I’ll go see what Rip is doing.”

“Probably laughing at me,” Dingo growled as they parted ways.

Dingo thought about simply hiding in his den for the rest of the day, but the sticky blood was starting to make him feel incredibly uncomfortable. With a sigh, he started off toward the water trough in the center of the camp to wash it off. As he walked, he glanced up ahead at the largest den sitting at the very back of the camp on the side of the largest sand dune. The land sloped upward toward the large den, giving it the appearance of towering over everyone else. It was the Leader’s den where Dingo’s father would be resting. Dingo tried not to look that way since he didn’t particularly like his father who had never had anything to do with him.

Right beside the huge den was another large den that was exclusive to another dingo who had control over the pack: the Second in Command. Who happened to be Bone. When Dingo spared a glance in that direction, he saw Bone sitting outside his large den, talking to Rock with his typical cocky grin. Bone was the second most powerful dingo in the pack after their father and he made sure everyone knew that.

Ignoring the sudden dark stare of his older brother, Dingo stalked over to the water trough. He dipped his tail in to flick the water over the rest of his body and wash the sticky blood off, trying not to wince when the gritty water splashed against his wounds. When at last he was relatively clean, he tried to avoid looking at his ragged, scarred reflection in the water. With a sigh, he turned to walk away then stopped and pricked his ears when he heard the sound of Rip’s rough voice.

When Dingo looked around to spot him, he noticed Rip sitting next to Tear, their yellow eyes glowing with dark amusement. While Rip was fairly skinny with dark red fur, Tear was slightly heavier with lighter orange fur. Obviously Bone had grown tired of Rip’s company and sent him to go hang out with Tear. Since Rip was more like Bone’s minion than his friend, he only got to hang around with him when Bone felt like it; the rest of the time he spent with Tear.

Unable to drown out the incessant noise of Rip bragging to Tear about what he, Bone, and Rock had done to him, Dingo growled and stalked into the den that he shared with Rip and Tear. Had Bone not been Second in Command, he would have shared the den with his brothers, as well, but thankfully Dingo could usually escape him there.

When he glanced over his shoulder Bone appeared to be recounting the tale to everyone. Bone caught his eye and sneered at him, his creepy amber eyes glowing with whatever dark thoughts were going through his mind, all of them most likely involving Dingo dying in some way or another. Turning bitterly away from his brother's sneer, Dingo crouched down and slipped into his small rock den where he slumped down on the sandy floor. Once again he found himself longing for his sister's comfort and kind words.

For several moments, he lay there in the painful aftermath of the brutal attack, filled with misery as he thought about the pack's cruel ways. Closing his eyes in sorrow, he relived his past, how the dingoes had always been cruel and how they had always hated him.

The dingoes of the pack fought and sometimes killed for fun and always got away with it. The pack only liked evil, bloodthirsty animals who killed and were willing to do anything to get what they wanted, not dingoes like him who actually cared about them and wanted the violence to stop. They didn't like dingoes who thought for themselves instead of obeying everything the Leader and Second in Command said. They called those dingoes 'different' and usually exiled them from the pack to live alone in the desert. From then on, they were only known as outcasts and were treated horribly by the pack. The pack loved to kill things, especially outcasts, because it was easy to get away with; the pack actually praised the killers.

It was only because of luck, either good or bad, that Dingo wasn't dead or an outcast yet, although Bone was always trying to find a reason to exile him. But even though he stayed in the pack he was constantly ridiculed and harassed by the others for being 'different'.

His sister had been different, too, but nobody knew and now she was gone.

He jumped when his dark thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the shuffling of claws against sand. Slowly he raised his eyes to see Rip and

Tear enter the den, still laughing and chatting about what a wimp he was.

“You should have seen him!” Rip snickered. “He was terrified, as always! Stupid Dingo! Bone and I tore him apart!”

“I wish I’d been there!” Tear exclaimed.

Rip laughed. “Yeah, you should have been! We really ripped Dingo to shreds!”

Dingo looked up in mingled sadness and irritation, knowing it was useless to try to block them out. “Do you two *mind*?” he growled. “I came in here to *escape* your annoying voices.”

Rip glared at him. “Well, you can leave again. And you can never come back for all I care! Just stop bothering me!”

Dingo simply turned away with a low growl.

“Anyway, where were we before the freak interrupted us?” Rip growled, turning back to Tear and muttering, “I can’t believe we still have to share a den with him!”

“Yeah, Bone’s lucky,” Tear agreed. “He gets that cool Second in Command den.” He curled his lip in jealousy.

Rip rolled his eyes, suddenly annoyed. “I know. But Bone’s the oldest of us, so he’s always going to be better off.” Casting an evil glance at Dingo, he added mockingly, “Whereas the youngest over here is destined to be a failure for the rest of his life.”

Dingo rolled his eyes and curled himself up tighter even though he was used to the taunts. “You’ve been spending too much time with Bone,” he muttered to Rip. “But I guess he needs a good little slave like you.”

Tear snickered while Rip narrowed his yellow eyes in anger. “I’m no slave!” he snarled. “That’s your job.”

“I don’t cater to you!” Dingo retorted.

Rip growled in annoyance and turned away from him. “Maybe I can find a way to move in with Bone and away from Dingo,” he muttered to himself before flopping down in his usual spot in the small, rocky den, the old scars on his red face oddly illuminated by the moonlight streaming through the entrance. With a snort, Tear padded forward to lie down next to him, falling asleep the instant his orange head hit the ground.

Sighing, Dingo laid his head down on his brown paws, his long brown fur feeling uncomfortably cold without the presence of Claw sleeping beside him, something he still remembered and missed. Wincing,

he curled up even tighter in the dark, silent den. He had tried to tell himself to get over his sister's death—it had been a year—but he never could and each night he hoped to see her light brown body lying peacefully beside him. He still woke up expecting to see her smiling face first thing in the morning; he could still picture the kindness in her light brown eyes.

Flinching with grief, Dingo pushed those images from his mind and tried to force himself to sleep, wishing he would never have to wake up to face the pack and endure another horrible day. There seemed to be no end to the agonizing cycle. With all the taunts and attacks he suffered every day, Dingo would have given up and let one of the pack members kill him if not for the promise he had made to Claw to keep going even when it got difficult.

Letting out a sigh, Dingo tried not to think about Claw or the promise, but sadly he couldn't stop himself from thinking about how she would never smile at him ever again. Dingo felt only pain where his heart was supposed to be when he reminded himself once again that Claw was gone. He knew he had taken all of his time with her for granted and he knew he should have valued her eleven years of life much more than he had. A flash of deep pain and guilt made him wince when he remembered that it was all his fault Claw was dead.

Want to read more? Check out [Hunted Home](#) on Amazon.com.